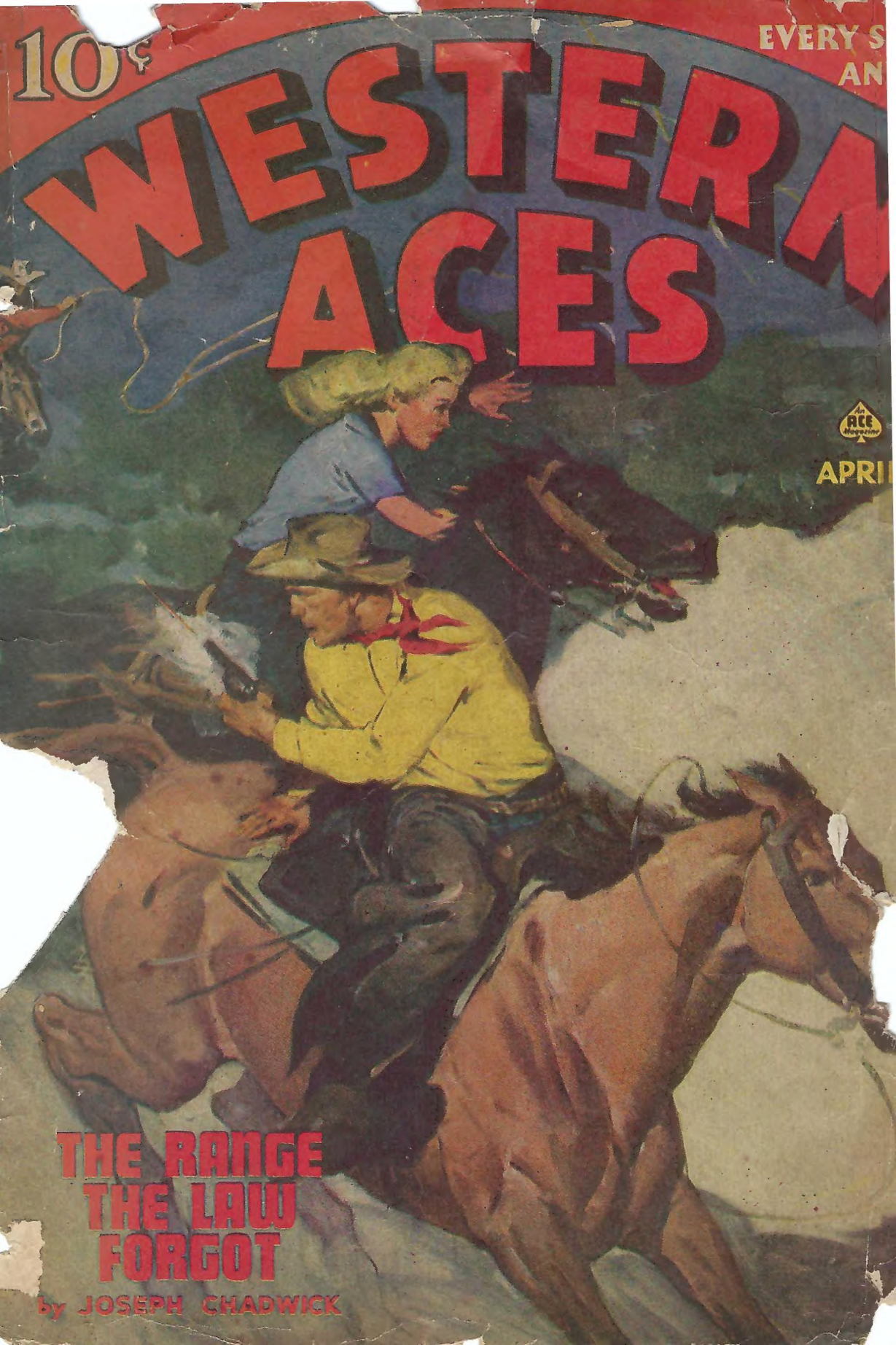
10¢

EVERY S
AN

WESTERN ACES



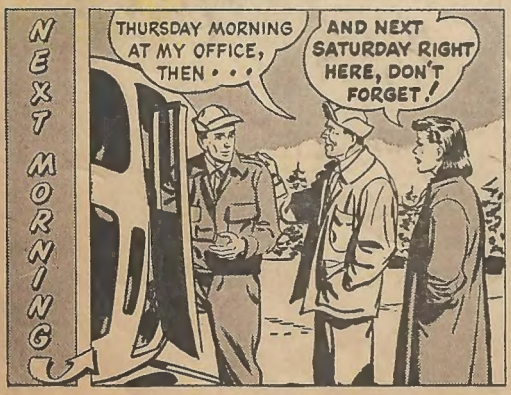
APRI

THE RANGE THE LAW FORGOT

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

LAKE RESCUE STARTS THINGS MOVING . . .

DICK WERTH, FLYING HIS HELICOPTER CITY-WARD AFTER ROUGHING IT IN A NORTHERN MICHIGAN CAMP, SIGHTS ICE-BOATERS MAROONED ON ICE FLOE IN LAKE HURON.



"I was completely bald, and now after using your wonderful treatment, after 8 weeks, new hair coming . . . all over bald area." —P. J. MAFFUCCI, Berkeley, Calif.

". . . My dandruff [scale] is gone, hair normal . . . baldness disappearing . . . Purchased BRANDENFELS' on advice of barber." —REV. L. C. ELLIOTT, Warren, Ore.

Hundreds report "I've Grown Hair"

"Today, after 10 weeks of usage, the bald area is completely filled in with new hair." —NORVAL B. SIMMS, Hawthorne, Calif.

"DANDRUFF [scale] GONE" says Nurse . . . CLARA ALLEN writes: ". . . doing wonders for my hair . . . I really appreciate something that helps the dryness and my dandruff [scale] is all gone . . . Being a nurse, I would recommend this for anyone." —Portland, Oregon

CARL BRANDENFELS, world-famous Hair Farmer of St. Helens, Ore., who perfected the treatment bearing his name after 14 years of research and study of hair growth and development.

HERE'S POSITIVE PROOF...

CARL BRANDENFELS.. World-Famous Hair Farmer of St. Helens, Ore., makes no extravagant claims, but refers you to these sworn statements by men and women all over the nation acclaiming his discovery. His files are bulging with testimonials such as the ones reproduced on this page. They tell you in their own words what the treatment has done for them. YOU CAN FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF in the privacy of your own home WHAT IT WILL DO FOR YOU.

"HAIR LINE HAS FILLED IN" says printer who states that he now has ". . . fringe all around former hairline . . . At sides hairline has filled in . . ." — W. A. BERDAHL

". . . dandruff [scale] entirely cured . . . falling hair stopped . . . new hair on bald spots . . ." — E. T. PETERSON

". . applied treatment daily . . have noticed a new growth of hair . . all traces of dandruff [scale] completely eliminated." —HON. JOSEPH G. NAUMAN, Oregon Judge.

Enthusiastic users report...

- HAS STOPPED EXCESSIVE FALLING hair.
- HAS IMPROVED hair appearance remarkably.
- NEW HAIR GROWTH has been promoted.
- HAIR MORE LUSTROUS and manageable.
- FREEDOM FROM DANDRUFF SCALE.
- SCALP and HAIR CONDITIONS improved.

Pleasant and inexpensive to use . . . non-sticky . . . odorless . . . simple directions easy to follow.

For Scalp and Hair...

THE WORLD-FAMOUS St. Helens, Oregon

Hair Farmer's Treatment

Cash Price: $15 (Plus $3 Fed. Tax).
C.O.D.: Pay Postman $18 (plus postage).
Fill Out the Order Form Below...

MAIL TODAY!

None Genuine without this signature on every bottle:

THE HAIR FARMER
St. Helens, Ore.

CARL BRANDENFELS, "The Hair Farmer" AFG447
St. Helens, Oregon

Dear Sir: Please send me your 5-weeks Scalp and Hair Treatment with directions for use in my own home.

Cash ☐ I enclose $15 plus 20% Federal Tax ($3) total $18 (Postpaid).

C.O.D. ☐ I agree to pay postman $18 plus postal charges.

Name.....

Address.....

Town, Zone, State.....

Please Print Plainly

APRIL
1947

Vol. 24
No. 3

WESTERN ACES

THE RANGE THE LAW FORGOT
(Novelette) ..... JOSEPH CHADWICK 4
Steve Kerrigan has to play the role of the renegade he'd vowed to see through gunsmoke.

GHOST-TOWN GAMBLE ..... KENNETH L. SINCLAIR 21
This rannyhan learns about phantom .45's in a long-dead boom town.

BADMAN'S BLUNDER ..... EARL W. SCOTT 27
The keen-eyed sheriff finds the murder sign of a careless killer.

BUNCH QUITTER'S SUMMONS ..... GIFF CHESHIRE 31
Trigger trouble catches up with a young maverick when he attempts to break away from a holster herd.

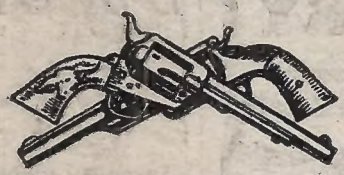
SIXES STAKE A FOOL'S-GOLD STRIKE
(Novelette) ..... J. EDWARD LEITHEAD 38
Colt metal forces Jared Pace to risk his luck against landhog claim-jumpers.

CHUTING PARDNERS ..... JOE ARCHIBALD 56
These two lazy galoots wake up to a muzzle-rimmed nightmare when they try to bed down in Bedrock Springs.

BENSON'S LOST BONANZA ..... NAT MCKELVEY 65
True story of the search for a hidden hoard of silver.

SIDEKICKS IN A JACKPOT ..... WILSON L. COVERT 69
Instead of collecting a dinero dividend when they side the law, two erstwhile cowpokes draw a pistol pay check.

Cover by A. Leslie Ross



Published bi-monthly by Periodical House, Inc. Office of publication, 29 Worthington Street, Springfield 3, Mass. Editorial and executive offices, 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y., A. A. Wyn, President. Entered as second class matter on September 14, 1936, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered at U.S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1947, by Periodical House, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, Inc., 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y. Yearly Subscription, 60 cents. Single Copies, 10 cents. Please send all subscriptions and correspondence relating to subscriptions to Periodical House, Inc., 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD!
TRAIN FOR A FUTURE IN
DIESEL

● Prepare for the big earning power of **Diesel Trained Men.** Start learning at home, in spare time. UEI's easy, practical training covers all phases of DIESEL engine operation, fuel systems, auxiliary equipment, repairs and maintenance. When home course is completed, you come to Chicago for actual shop practice on DIESEL MOTORS under expert instructors, at UEI's fine, modern school.
BEGIN AT ONCE—GET ALL THE FACTS **FREE.** WRITE TODAY!

DIESEL DIVISION UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
1314 Belden Avenue • Dept. 747-D • Chicago 14, Illinois

POEMS WANTED

For Musical Setting

Mother, Home, Love, Sacred, Patriotic, Comic or any subject. Don't Delay—Send us your Original Poem at once—for immediate consideration and FREE Rhyming Dictionary.

RICHARD BROTHERS
53 WOODS BUILDING — CHICAGO 1, ILL.

GAME SUPPLIES

Flats — tops — loads — caps — card readers — inks — daubs. Game Boxes and Books.

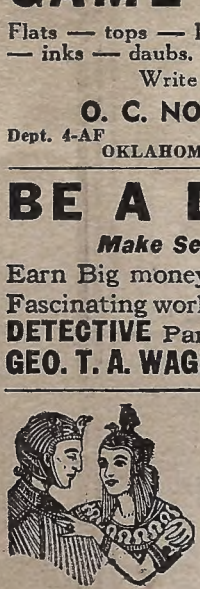
Write for free catalog.

O. C. NOVELTY COMPANY
Dept. 4-AF 1311 West Main Street
OKLAHOMA CITY 4, OKLAHOMA

BE A DETECTIVE

Make Secret Investigations

Earn Big money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience Unnecessary. **DETECTIVE** Particulars **FREE.** Write to **GEO. T. A. WAGNER,** 125 W. 86th St. **N. Y.**



CHARM PERFUME

An enchanting perfume of irresistible allure, clinging for hours with ineffable, fascinating fragrance. Just a tiny drop is enough. Full size bottle 98c prepaid, or $1.32 C.O.D. Directions free. One bottle FREE if two are ordered.

ROLLDEX, Box 445, Dept. 327, Huntington Station, New York

do you WORRY?

Why worry and suffer any longer if we can help you? Try a Brooks Patented Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance for most forms of reducible rupture is GUARANTEED to bring YOU heavenly comfort and security—day and night—at work and play—or it costs you NOTHING. Thousands happy. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or springs. For men, women, and children. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial** to prove it. Not sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and proof of results. All Correspondence Confidential.

BROOKS COMPANY, 301-D STATE ST., MARSHALL, MICH.

NOW . . .

The TRUTH about

MARRIAGE RELATIONS IS FRANKLY DISCUSSED

AT LAST an eminent doctor tells all the long obscured facts, in frank, easy-to-understand language! No longer any need for ignorant guessing about the magnificent instinct that is your birthright. No more prudish evasions, no more veiled generalities in these 576 pages of TRUTHFUL, straightforward FACTS!

Everything you should know is openly discussed. Be a master of Love's complexities! Learn how to win and hold love! Don't rely on half-truths.

DON'T BE A SLAVE TO IGNORANCE AND FEAR

Education is the key to a perfect love-filled life. Ignorance and misinformation lead to fear, worry, disease and shame. End ignorance TODAY! Learn how to overcome physical mismating. Endow yourself with the lifetime of marital happiness that should be yours!

PARTIAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Honeymoon—Can Virility Be Regained?—Mismating—Love Starvation—Frigidity in a Wife—Promiscuity—Venereal Diseases—Perfect Mating—Holding Your Husband—A Lover's Privileges—Pregnancy—Intimate Feminine Hygiene—Essential of Happy Marriage—Planned Conception—Why Men Leave Home.

SEND NO MONEY!

To show our faith in this amazing book, we offer it to you on trial. Send no money—just fill out the coupon below. When it arrives, in plain wrapper, pay the postman $2.98 plus postage. Keep book ten days—if not completely satisfied send it back and we will refund your money immediately without question. "Eugenics and Sex Harmony" will not be sold to minors.

STATE AGE WHEN ORDERING

576 Pages—Over 100 Graphic Illustrations

●

Pioneer Publications, Inc.
1790 Broadway
New York City

SEND NO MONEY • • • MAIL COUPON TODAY

Amazing New Book Included FREE of Extra Charge

The Ogino-Knaus Method of rhythmic Birth Control with table of "safe" and "fertile" periods, explained in Dr. Clinton's new book included FREE with each purchase of EUGENICS AND SEX HARMONY

PIONEER PUBLICATIONS, INC.
1790 Broadway, Dept. 435,
New York 19, N. Y.

Please send me "Eugenics and Sex Harmony" in plain wrapper. If I am not completely satisfied I can return the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded immediately. Also send me free of charge your book on "New Birth Control Facts."

☐ Send C. O. D. plus postage.
☐ I enclose $2.98, ship postpaid.

Name _____
Address _____
City and State _____ Age _____

Orders from Foreign Countries 18 Shillings in Advance

The Range the Law Forgot

By Joseph Chadwick

CHAPTER I

IT WAS the year of the Great Cold, when cattle perished by the thousands and their owners could only hug their fires in numb helplessness. Even now, with winter supposed to be a month away, the sun was pale and the sky had a sullen look. The air was raw, and in it a man could see his breath smoke. And when the stage dropped Steve Kerrigan at Dalton, he stood shivering in the "store" suit which had been too heavy in Arizona and here in Wyoming seemed paper thin.

Looking about Dalton, which was little different from a hundred other back-country cowtowns, Steve called himself a fool for having come north. Yet he knew, at the same time, that his search for the man, his ex-partner, who had robbed him of his share of three thousand dollars was not exactly a fool's errand.

Across the narrow street was an eating place. An oldish man came from the café, peered at the bleak sky and shook his head, then drifted over toward the stage company office. A law badge was pinned to his fur-collared coat. He nodded in friendly fashion.

"Cold, for this time of year."

"Too cold for me, after Arizona."

"Traveled far, eh? And you're headed for Bell ranch?"

A strange fate befell Steve Kerrigan when he hit the cold trails of Wyoming. For Steve, who was on a manhunt mission, found himself persuaded by a pretty girl to play the role of the renegade he'd vowed to see through gunsmoke.

Gripping Novelette

"That's exactly right, marshal."

"Well, you're expected. I reckon somebody from Bell will come to pick you up."

The lawman nodded again and moved on. He left Steve Kerrigan bewildered, and thinking, *why should I be expected?* Not even the man he was after could have known that he was on his way to Dalton and the ranch named Bell.

A BUCKBOARD and team came swinging in from the south road. The horses were marked with a bell brand, and Steve thought, *Morgan Bell?* With the question in his mind, he watched the rig make a sharp U-turn that brought it to a halt directly in front of him. The driver, a girl in mannish range duds, smiled brightly and said:

"Hello, Frank. I'm glad you've come." She held out a gloved hand. "I'm Anne Delroy, as you've no doubt guessed."

Steve didn't take the proffered hand, but said, "You've made a mistake, miss. My name is Steve Kerrigan. I guess you were expecting Frank Harlan. I know him, and expected to find him here. It looks as though we're both disappointed."

He was more angry than disappointed, for he had made the long trip from Arizona thinking that Frank Harlan had headed for Bell ranch. But he could see the girl's disappointment was deep felt. It was more like dismay. She said bewilderedly, "But his letter said he would

arrive on today's stage, for sure!"

"I'm as sorry as you—" Steve began.

"You must be a friend of Frank's."

"Well . . ."

Steve let it go at that, for there was no reason why he should reveal to this girl, who evidently thought well of the absent man, that he had come to hate Frank Harlan. The two of them had been partners and worked the wild horse country of Black Mesa in Arizona. They had hunted mustangs, broken the ones they caught to the saddle, and after a year's hard work, had set out to sell their string. Some had been sold at an army post, at a hundred and twenty-five dollars a head, and the remainder had been sold to ranchers.

The two of them had ended up with a little more than three thousand dollars, in gold and silver. Then one night Frank Harlan had jumped Steve and downed him with a blow across the head with a gun butt. When Steve regained consciousness, Frank Harlan had pulled out—taking their poke with him. Steve hadn't been able to find the man's trail, but he had known that Harlan had received letters from a girl named Anne Delroy urging him to come to Bell ranch, in Dalton Valley, Wyoming . . . No, Steve Kerrigan did not call Frank Harlan a friend.

The girl was studying Steve with widened eyes when she said, as though thinking aloud, "You're about Frank's age. You could easily pass for him, since no one here has seen him since he was eight years old. Yes, it could be done."

"What do you mean?" Steve asked, not liking her tone.

"As Frank's friend, would you do me a favor?" the girl said. "It would mean so much. You see, Steve, Frank's grandfather, Morgan Bell, is very old and in failing health. We've given up hope for him. He's just suffered another stroke, and I think he's only willing himself to live until Frank gets here. Except for Frank, Morgan Bell has no other relatives. Frank is his heir, and . . ."

With a rush of words, she told Steve about Frank Harlan's background. The man was the son of old Morgan Bell's daughter and a gambler named Clint Harlan. Martha Bell had been but eighteen when she ran off and married Clint Harlan, and she had died shortly after the birth of a son. When the son was eight years old, Clint Harlan had brought him to visit Bell ranch.

Morgan Bell had hated the man, and the two of them had quarreled when the old rancher wanted Harlan to leave the boy at Bell. Clint Harlan had taken Frank away, and Morgan Bell hadn't heard from them again. But a year ago, on suffering his first stroke and realizing that he was growing very old, Morgan Bell had asked Anne Delroy, who was the daughter of Bell's foreman and was now doing the ranch's paper work, to attempt to locate his grandson.

"I FINALLY learned he was in Arizona," the girl told Steve, "and I wrote him a dozen letters begging him to come to Bell. Two weeks ago, a reply came. It said Frank would arrive at Dalton today." There was grief as well as disappointment in her voice. "Now I'll have to go back to Bell and see his hurt, unless you, Steve, will come with me and—"

"And pose as Frank Harlan?"

"It would be granting a dying man's last request."

"It wouldn't work," Steve objected. "The old man would know."

"He wouldn't, for he's in a coma most of the time," Anne said, almost desperately. "All you would have to do is to let him look at you. He's unable to talk except to say just a few words. If only I could make you understand! Morgan Bell is the salt of the earth, and the only enemy he ever made was Clint Harlan. He's generous, kind—and all he asks of life is to see his grandson."

"It must mean a lot to you, too."

"It does," said Anne Delroy. "I've lived at Bell since I was a little girl, and Gramps—that's what I always called him—was good to me. Perhaps because he'd lost his daughter and his grandson. If I could make his last hours happy, I'd feel

that I've repaid him for all the kindnesses he's done me."

She held out her hands to Steve. "You'll do it?" she begged.

And Steve Kerrigan reluctantly nodded. He might hate Frank Harlan and care nothing about Morgan Bell, whom he did not know, but this girl somehow got to his heart. Steve Kerrigan was young, and he knew few girls as attractive as Anne Delroy. Because of her, he said, "All right," when he knew that the two of them were inviting trouble.

Steve put his valise into the buckboard, then climbed up and sat beside the girl. Her relief was a marvelous thing to see. Her lips could not stop smiling, and her brown, gold-flecked eyes were suddenly happy.

As she got the rig moving, Steve stole a look at her. Her hair, from what he could see of it beneath her Stetson, was auburn—bright with coppery tints. Her skin was smoothly brown, and her features were finely molded. There was no comparing her with the women Steve Kerrigan had known, mostly the honky-tonk girls of some grubby Arizona town. Anne Delroy made him feel that his past life had been far from complete.

They left the town of Dalton behind. The south road led through finer graze land than any Steve had seen in Arizona, where there was only scant bunch grass and too little water. As the pale sun sank, he had glimpses of herds of fine-looking cattle. The ranches of Dalton Valley were prosperous, and Steve told himself that Frank Harlan was a fool not to have come here where he belonged.

It was cold and nearly dark by the time Anne Delroy said, "Here's Bell," and Steve saw the ranch buildings deep in a little valley. He had a glimpse of barns, bunkhouse, corrals, and outbuildings. Then the buckboard came to a halt before a big log-and-stone ranch house, the door of which swung open and poured out a shaft of lamplight. A man looked out and said:

"Anne, is that Frank Harlan with you?"

"Dad, Frank—"

"Never mind," the man said tonelessly. "You better take Frank right up. Morgan Bell is sinking, and Doc Burton thinks this is the end. The old man keeps asking for his grandson."

Anne touched Steve's arm, and said, "Come quickly," and he followed her from the buckboard up across the porch and into the wide hallway of the house. The man whom Steve took for Hank Delroy, Anne's father, grasped his hand and muttered, "Good to have you here, son." He was a small wiry man, gray-haired. He showed a full measure of grief.

Anne was already mounting the stairs, and Steve removed his hat as he followed. They passed along an upper hall to an open doorway. Here was the sick-room, its lamp turned low and the doctor sitting by his patient. A young man, Doc Burton rose and motioned Steve and the girl to come close. It seemed to Steve Kerrigan that the white-maned old gentleman lying so still in the bed was already gone. And for a brief instant, he felt relieved. But then a hollow voice whispered:

"Frank—that you, boy?"

And Steve had to go through with his masquerade.

THE face on the pillow was rugged, gaunt, gray. It seemed to Steve Kerrigan that a wispy smile formed on the cold and colorless lips that a shaggy mustache partially hid. It seemed too that Morgan Bell's eyes lost some of their dullness, looking up—searching. Steve stood by the bedside, Anne Delroy's hand on his arm to hold him there. He was judged by the dying man's eyes, measured and weighed. It seemed to Steve Kerrigan that his mind was an open book that Morgan Bell could read; that his soul lay naked for those searching eyes to probe.

"So you came, boy?"

Morgan Bell's voice was no louder than a sigh.

Steve felt choked up, unable to speak. He reached down and took the old man's gnarled hand, now icy cold, in his own.

And if he had any doubts about this making Morgan Bell happy, they now dissolved. The man's eyes were brighter, and he was smiling.

"He came, Gramps," Anne Delroy said, smiling to hide tears. "He came, just as I said he would."

"He's a big buckaroo, eh?"

"Like you, Gramps," the girl whispered. "He's here to stay, so don't you fret any more. From now on, you can just rest."

"The Pool?" said Morgan Bell.

"Frank will take care of that, Gramps."

The old gentleman said, "Ah," very softly, and it was like a sigh of vast relief. He closed his eyes, and Steve felt the cold hand grow limp. Doc Burton came quickly, and shook his head when Anne whispered, "Doctor, he's not—"

"Sleeping," the medico said. "Or rather, he's sunk back in a coma."

They left the room, the girl's hand still on Steve's arm, and in the hall she looked at him with shining eyes. "You see?" she said softly. "It made him happy. I could not have it otherwise." She was close to breaking down. "I guess you know how much I love him."

"What if he doesn't go?" Steve said. "How would you square yourself?"

"There's no hope of that," she told him. "Though I wish there was. I'd square myself, somehow."

They were at the stairs now, going down. Steve said curiously, "What did the old gentleman mean by 'the Pool'?"

"Oh, that!" Anne was frowning. "The Dalton Valley Ranchers' Pool, an association Morgan Bell headed. It was organized a year ago to fight the Venturilla Land Company, which is trying to buy up the entire valley—to open it for settlers. There's a meeting of the Pool tonight, and Gramps wanted you—since he thinks you're Frank Harlan—to attend."

Steve said, "Oh!"

The girl gave him a searching look. "You wouldn't—"

"Attend that meeting as Frank Harlan?"

"It would mean so much to Morgan Bell—to all Dalton Valley," Anne said quickly. "Three members of the Pool have already withdrawn, and sold out to Venturilla. The seven remaining members were to vote tonight on whether or not to deal with Venturilla. You see, the land company is offering such high prices for rangeland that most of the ranchers feel that they should sell out. The joker in Venturilla's offer is this: One-third payment will be in cash, and two-thirds in stock."

"And Morgan Bell is against selling?"

"Dead-set against it."

"Why does it matter to him if the other ranchers sell out?"

"Isn't it clear?" Anne said. "Once the majority of the ranchers sell out, the range will be restricted for the others. Maybe it'll be ruined. Settlers would fence in the water, put the range to the plow. But there is something else. Morgan Bell believes that the land company is a fake. The man behind Venturilla is Stace Ballard, a tinhorn promoter. Gramps believes that Ballard really wants to get hold of the valley for a big cattle outfit. If Gramps had proof of that, he could hold the Pool together and bring Ballard to a dead stop."

"How so?"

"Ballard has won support of the town," Anne explained, "by promising to settle a thousand farmers in the valley. If he kept that promise, it would benefit Dalton. Business would thrive. But if he really means to turn the valley range over to a cattle outfit, it would hurt the town. With one big outfit holding the range, instead of so many small ones as now hold it, there would be no business for the town."

"Can't it be proved that Stace Ballard is a tinhorn?"

"He's too shrewd," the girl said. "And after tonight, there'll be no time to find the evidence against him. Without Morgan Bell's vote, the Pool will break up. If only Frank Harlan had come!"

"Why bother yourself about it?" Steve

asked. "Morgan Bell is near death, and you don't even know Frank Harlan."

"I grew up at Bell," Anne said. "I love the place."

"Well, if it means that much to you," Steve said, "I'll go to that meeting as Frank Harlan. But afterwards, I'm washing my hands of the whole crazy business. What time is the meeting?"

CHAPTER II

ON THE way back to town, Steve Kerrigan told himself he was playing the fool. And because of a pretty face. He had been given a meal at Bell ranch, by the Mexican woman cook, but that was as much as he could hope to get out of this loco business. Anne Delroy would smile and thank him, and then, having used him, would see him leave without regret. But what soured him was the need to masquerade as a man he hated. He still had not told the girl why he had come seeking Frank Harlan, and she still considered him a friend of the absent heir to Bell ranch.

They drove in the buckboard, with Steve now handling the reins. Tonight, Anne was wholly feminine. She was wrapped in a dark blue cloak as protection against the cold, and beneath it wore a brown dress with form-fitting bodice and billowy skirt. There was a velvet band about her smooth throat, and she wore a cameo brooch on her dress. Back at the house, before donning her hooded cloak, she had pirouetted before Steve and asked, "How do I look?"

She had looked wonderful, and Steve had said so. But he knew that she was using her feminine wiles to bend him to her will. Even while he told himself to be on guard against Anne Delroy, he wondered if she had any suitors. A pretty girl like that. The thought left him as he began to shiver. He had neither overcoat nor gloves.

"This cold gets into you," he said.

"It's an odd cold," Anne agreed, her teeth chattering. "The air is so still. You notice there's no wind?"

"I'll take Arizona for mine," Steve said, and with voice and reins lifted the team into a faster trot.

Dalton's windows showed lights, but the cold kept people off the streets. Anne pointed out the town hall, a square white-painted frame building, and Steve swung the rig over and pulled up. "You go inside," he told the girl, "while I put the team up at the livery barn."

As she climbed down, a man came from the Dalton Hotel, directly opposite, and strode toward them. Seeing Anne's expression change, Steve looked at the man. He was burly, perhaps in his middle forties, and dressed in the manner of a city man. His face was heavy, florid. His lips formed a broad smile, but even in the darkness Steve noticed that his steely eyes showed neither humor nor friendliness.

Halting by the buckboard, the man said, "Good evening, Miss Delroy. And you, sir, must be Frank Harlan. I heard that you arrived by today's stage." He was holding out a hand to Steve. "I'm Stace Ballard, of the Venturilla Land Company. No doubt you've heard of me."

Steve grasped the proffered hand briefly.

Ballard went on, "I'm glad you're here, sir, for it's certain that you and I can make a deal. As I understand it, Bell ranch is not your home—even though you'll inherit it, on Morgan Bell's death. From that it would seem that you'd be more reasonable than old Morgan Bell. But we'll discuss the sale of Bell, once Morgan has passed on. Right now, I'm offering you five hundred dollars to withdraw from the Pool tonight."

Anne Delroy gasped, "Oh, no!"

Steve said, "If I withdraw, the Pool will break up?"

"That's right," Ballard said. "Morgan Bell is the man holding it together, but now you have his vote. With the Pool ended, some of the members will deal with me right off. The others will come around later. The Pool means nothing to you, a stranger, but five hundred dollars—"

"It's a lot of money," Steve agreed. "But so long as Morgan Bell lives, I'll vote his way. That's final, Ballard."

The man's smile faded, his steely eyes glinted coldly. "We'll see," he muttered, and turned back toward the hotel. Midway across the street he paused to light a cigar. Even as his match flared up, two men stepped down from the hotel's porch. Steve was not blind to that.

"Go inside," he said to Anne Delroy.

As he drove toward the livery barn downstreet, the two men drifted that way. Steve knew what was about to happen. He regretted now that he had left his valise at Bell ranch. His six-gun was in the bag.

TO STEVE'S shout, the livery stable doors swung open. He drove the rig inside and told the liveryman to put up the team for an hour or so. Dropping down from the buckboard, he looked around for something that might help him defend himself and he found, just as Ballard's hardcases reached the open doorway, a handle broken off a pitchfork.

He faced the pair warily, judged them to be saddle bums—drifters. Both were armed. One was burly, with a scowling unshaven face. The other was small, wiry, scar-faced.

The burly hardcase said, "Stranger, we've been told to change your mind about something."

"If Ballard paid you enough," Steve replied, "come on."

The pair came at him, perhaps not seeing in the dim light of the barn's one lantern that he had armed himself with a club. The smaller man leapt suddenly, and Steve swung his club up and down. It landed with a dull thud against the hardcase's shoulder, driving him with a yell to his knees.

But he instantly wrapped his arms around Steve's legs, holding him while the second hardcase rushed. The burly man's fist crashed against Steve's head, exploded pain through his skull. Half blinded, knocked off balance, Steve fell over backward. A boot slammed into his left side—once, twice, a third time.

For a moment that seemed an eternity, Steve thought he would have to take the beating. But he managed to hold to his club and, rolling over and away from his assailants, he got to his feet. He struck at the burly man, and the blow caught him squarely across the mouth. Reeling backward, spilling blood, the hardcase yelled with his pain. Steve swung on the scar-faced man, who was drawing his gun.

A blow to the fellow's wrist cracked bone, and the six-gun dropped from the man's hand. Steve stepped over and picked it up, tossing away his club. He turned to the burly man, who was holding both hands to his bleeding mouth, and relieved him of his weapon. He stepped back, groggy with pain and gasping for breath.

"Tell Stace Ballard it didn't work," he said flatly. "Tell him, too, I'll not forget this."

He turned and walked unsteadily from the barn, and nobody tried to stop him. He tossed the two six-guns into the ice-scummed water trough, then headed for the town hall.

The Pool meeting didn't interest Steve much. When he walked into the town hall, Anne Delroy was talking with the six other members of the association—three oldsters, men like Morgan Bell who had homesteaded years before in Dalton Valley, and three younger men who had inherited their spreads. The entire group eyed him doubtfully, for he bore marks of his fight with Ballard's toughs.

After introducing him to the others—as Frank Harlan, of course—Anne asked, "What happened?"

"Ballard sent a couple of hardcases to change my mind."

He saw her alarm and grinned to tell her he wasn't badly hurt. The meeting was called to order, and it turned out to be a wearisome discussion. Each of the three old-timers seemed half inclined to accept Stace Ballard's deal, but they were men of their word and would not sell out to the land company unless a majority vote was taken. They argued that they were old and no longer able to work cattle, that the Venturilla offer guranteed them a secure retirement.

One of the three younger ranchers liked Ballard's offer, but he stated that

his wife was against selling out. The other two younger men bluntly stated that they had families to support, and so should hold onto their spreads. Everyone present was aware that Morgan Bell was very ill, and regarded Steve—as Frank Harlan—as the one to talk for Bell ranch.

ON ANNE DELROY'S prompting, he said, "Gentlemen, Bell is against selling. It's Morgan Bell's belief that Dalton Valley should remain cattle country—and that Stace Ballard wouldn't turn it over to settlers as he claims. Morgan Bell has no proof, but he's convinced that Ballard means to turn the valley over to a big cattle outfit. If it works out that way, how much will the stock in Venturilla be worth? Not much, gentleman. Ballard can manipulate that stock, run it down in value, and it won't be worth the paper it's printed on."

"Mr. Ballard swears his stock will skyrocket in value," one of the older ranchers argued. "He claims that once the settlers come the railroad will build into Dalton. A thousand settlers and their families would make the whole valley prosper."

"If Ballard brings in his settlers and railroad," Steve said.

"You've got to have proof before we believe Stace Ballard is a liar," another old-timer told Steve. "If you show us proof, we'll hold our rangeland until hell freezes over."

Steve did not know what to say to that, but Anne Delroy did. She said, "How long will you give Frank to get the evidence—a month?"

There was much argument over that, but finally it was agreed that none of the Pool members would sell until a month was up. The vote was four to three in favor of waiting, and on those terms the meeting ended. Steve was glad to leave the town hall.

Walking with Anne to the livery barn, he said, "What's the idea—promising them proof that Ballard is playing a skin game?"

"It was the only thing I could think of to keep the Pool together," the girl said. "I know you won't stay—"

"You're right," he said. "I'm staying only long enough to even matters with Stace Ballard. I didn't take the beating he wanted me to have, but I took enough. I'll talk turkey with Ballard, then I'm pulling out."

"You could pay him back," Anne said, "by showing him up."

He gave her a doubtful look, wary of her, knowing that she was trying to keep her slender hold on him—to use him further. "How?" he said.

"I don't know yet," Anne said. "But I'll think of something—maybe tomorrow."

Steve said nothing to that. They got the buckboard and team from the livery barn, drove from town, headed south toward Bell ranch. Both Steve and the girl were shivering. The night seemed colder by the minute, yet nothing had changed. There still was no wind. The stars were bright overhead, and the moon was crystal clear. The cold came of its own volition, creeping across the dark rangeland without the fanfare of a storm. It was as silent and still as death. . . .

Back at Bell, Hank Delroy told them that Morgan Bell was resting quietly. The gray-haired mild-mannered foreman had been sitting up with the sick man. Dr. Burton had departed. After telling Hank how the Pool meeting had turned out, Anne showed Steve to a bedroom. Her manner was friendly, her eyes seemed much interested in him. And she said, just before leaving him alone, "I'm glad you came here. Frank Harlan himself couldn't have done better tonight."

Once she was gone, Steve thought sourly that he could have told her some surprising things about the real Frank Harlan. He wished now that he revealed that instead of being Frank Harlan's friend, he had been man-hunting him. *I'll tell her in the morning,* he decided, and so turned in.

He did not mention Frank Harlan when morning came. The girl was too happy about old Morgan Bell, who not only had lasted the night out but seemed

a little stronger. Doc Burton came about nine o'clock and was surprised to find his patient improved. "It seems he's over a crisis," the young medico confided to Anne and Steve. But he cautioned, "I wouldn't hope too much. His condition is —dangerous."

When the doctor was gone, Anne looked worriedly at Steve. "You can't leave now," she said. "If you left now, Gramps might suffer a relapse. Wait a few days, until he's stronger, then you can say that you must go back to Arizona to sell out a ranch you own there."

"Someday," Steve told her, "you're going to ride for a fall."

"Maybe the real Frank will come."

"If he does, how will you explain the two of us?"

"I don't know," Anne said, and suddenly looked scared.

CHAPTER III

MORGAN BELL grew steadily stronger. His several strokes had caused his left side to become paralyzed, but within a few days he was permitted to sit up in bed. Doc Burton was amazed by his patient's recovery, and he confideded to Anne and Steve that the old gentleman must have willed himself to live because of his grandson's homecoming. That was something Steve began to believe.

Morgan Bell sent for him several times a day, for a talk. The deceived man was happy in the thought that his grandson had come to stay at Bell. And Steve could see no way to untangle the trap that Anne Delroy had spun about him.

So he stayed on at Bell, working with the crew. Anne supplied him with a pair of woolen gloves she had knitted for Morgan Bell, and which hadn't been worn. She also tailored for him, after many fittings, a coat heavy enough to brace the winter. Outside, the coat was tarp canvas. Its lining was cut from a woolen blanket. Its fit was good, and Steve at last could stand the Wyoming cold.

In that first week, news reached Bell that was disturbing to Anne Delroy and her father. They kept it from Morgan Bell, however, so as not to worry him.

First, Si Landon, one of the older Pool members, accidentally killed himself when a rifle he had been cleaning went off. It happened at a time when the rancher's crew was riding range and his Chinese cook was in town for supplies. There was talk that Si Landon had handled firearms all his life, and should not have had such an accident. The Landon crew noted that a rider had left hoof marks in the ranch house yard, but no one stepped forth to say he visited Landon that day.

The town marshal, Matt Sayres, rode out and considered for a time but ended up by saying the rancher's death was surely an accident. Si Landon's daughter was married to a Dalton storekeeper, and she promptly, once the funeral was over, made a deal with Stace Ballard and his Venturilla Land Company.

The second bad news was of the Weyland family. A fire of undetermined origin swept their ranch house one night. Mark Weyland was a member of the Pool, and a man well along in years. He and his wife narrowly escaped death in the fire, and the next day he sold out to Stace Ballard.

Anne Delroy was suspicious, and told Steve, "Maybe both were accidents, but they worked to Stace Ballard's advantage. I'd gamble that those hardcases of his—those two who tried to beat you up, Steve—set that fire and killed old Si Landon, fixing it so it looked like an accident."

"Things like that happen," Steve reminded her. "Even a man used to guns gets careless with them. And a fire can start from an overheated kitchen stove."

"One of the Weyland riders said in town that he'd found an empty coal oil can not far from the burned house."

Steve stared at her. "Did he tell that to Matt Sayres?"

"Yes," Anne replied. "But Matt Sayres is old—and too comfortable. He won't do anything on such flimsy evidence. We need more proof than that to show Stace

Ballard up as an underhanded worker." She gazed worriedly at Steve. "If we're right, if he really had those 'accidents' happen, there may be others. Something may happen right here at Bell!"

SOMETHING did happen at Bell—and everywhere else. Not Stace Ballard, but a berserk Nature spread havoc through Dalton Valley. A high wind rose, bringing snow. The blizzard lasted for two days and nights, covering the range and piling up gigantic drifts.

When the snowfall ended, the wind stopped howling and the temperature rose. There was a slight thaw, but the third night it grew colder than before. A thick crust froze over the snow, and that was disaster. The hungry cattle might paw down through a light soft snow to get at grass, but the crust thwarted the animals. Starvation came to the valley.

Word from outside the valley told the same dark story: cattle everywhere were starving, dying, and unless warmer weather came to start a thaw whole herds would be wiped out and many ranchers ruined.

Working with the Bell crew, Steve Kerrigan helped haul grain and hay from the railroad at Jessup, forty miles beyond Dalton. It was back-breaking work, getting the two Bell ranch wagons, each drawn by six horses, over the snow-clogged roads. And after three trips were made, the wagons returned empty. The grain elevator and hay barn at Jessup were empty. Too many ranchers had drawn on the scant supply, and the railroad, supplying a vast expanse of territory, could not haul in more feed for the time being.

No thaw came. Day after day, the bitter cold lingered. Men could work outdoors for only short spells, and frostbite became a common ailment. Cattle took to gnawing at the bark of trees. Carcasses were scattered everywhere, and some ranchers put their crews to work skinning the fallen stock in the hope of selling the hides. The Bell herds shrank, and the other valley ranchers suffered losses as great. It seemed that Nature was siding Stace Ballard.

Sam Pierson and Pete Yerba, valley ranchers and members of the Pool, rode to Bell for a talk with old Morgan Bell or the man they knew as Frank Harlan. They were young men and had been against making a deal with Venturilla, but now, facing ruin, they were of a different mind.

Warming themselves before the fireplace in the ranch house office, they told Steve and Anne that they could not hold out. "It's beginning to look as though Stace Ballard is right," Pierson said bitterly, "and we ought to turn this valley over to the sodbusters."

Steve said nothing, and Anne Delroy for once did not argue against a sellout. Hank Delroy returned from a long, hard ride to a nester colony at Benton Flats outside the valley. He looked dead-beat, for he'd been in the saddle, changing horses wherever he could along the way, for more than twenty-four hours. He came into the office room, heading for the fireplace. He was blue from the cold.

"There's corn and hay, some oats and wheat at Benton Flats," he said. "Maybe five thousand bushels of grain and a hundred tons of alfalfa hay—enough feed to save a lot of cattle. But those damn nesters sold it to Stace Ballard."

Pierson and Yerba swore. Steve said, "Ballard bought it up?"

"Sure. To keep it out of our hands," Hank Delroy said. "He's shrewd as the devil himself. By keeping feed away from the valley ranchers, Ballard will force some of us to the wall. Then he'll buy up the spreads at his own price."

"He's not getting away with it," Steve said. "Hank, start our two wagons toward Benton Flats. Tell the crew to go armed. They're not to use their guns unless those farmers attack them." He faced Pierson and Yerba. "You men want to send wagons after some of that feed?"

"We'll have trouble with the law," Yerba said, "if we take that feed."

Steve shook his head. "We won't. I guarantee that. I'm going to have a talk

with Stace Ballard. I've been waiting for something like this. And now that he's overstepped himself, I know how to handle him."

TURNING from the office, Steve went up to his bedroom, which was across the hall from Morgan Bell's room. The old gentleman was sitting up in bed and through two open doorways saw Steve take the six-gun from his valise. As Steve stepped into the hall, belting on the gun-rig, the sick man said, "What's up, boy?"

Looking up, Steve was gripped by the startled thought that never did old Morgan Bell call him "Frank" or "grandson"—but always "boy." It seemed strange, for Steve Kerrigan was twenty-seven years old and he'd been making his way among men since he was thirteen. It was stranger still that Morgan Bell avoided speaking to him by name. They had spent many hours together during the past few weeks, sometimes over a game of checkers but mostly just talking. And Steve had done all the talking; it had been easy, for the old man never pried into his past.

"I'm going to settle things with Stace Ballard," Steve said flatly, stepping to the doorway of the older man's room. "He's outsmarted himself at last."

"The day is gone when such things are settled with guns, boy."

"I know," Steve replied. "But when a man is armed, he can talk big and loud—and the other hombre has got to listen."

Gaunt, enfeebled, Morgan Bell shook his head. 'Don't do it, son," he said. "It's not your fight."

"I owe it to Ballard," Steve said. "I've got to make him crawl."

He turned away, went down to the hall, put on hat and coat and gloves. Sam Pierson and Pete Yerba had left, to return to their ranches and start wagons to Benton Flats. Hank Delroy had gone to give orders to the Bell crew. But Anne came to the hallway and saw that Steve was wearing a gun.

"Steve, don't go," she said, frightened. "Neither Bell nor this valley means anything to you. I don't want you to get into trouble over something that doesn't concern you."

He faced her, frowning. "You've been using me right along. Why the sudden change of mind?"

"I have used you," she said. "But only because you're a friend of Frank Harlan's. Otherwise I wouldn't have—"

"We may as well settle that, too," he told her. "I'm no friend to Frank Harlan. I came here man-hunting that no-good son. He and I were partners in Arizona and I trusted him too far. He jumped me and gun-whipped me, and pulled out leaving me for dead. He robbed me of fifteen hundred dollars." He saw the look of shock on Anne's face. "I came here hoping to find him, to get back my money one way or another. Don't say again that Frank Harlan and I are friends!"

He swung away from her, jerked open the door, stepped out into the wintry dusk. He knew that he was a fool in more ways than one. And he'd played the fool because of Anne Delroy's pretty face, while she cared no more about him than about a fence post!

It was full-dark when Steve rode into Dalton and put his horse up at the livry barn, but the time was only a few minutes past five o'clock. The town's stores and shops were still open for business, and the windows of the Venturilla Land Company office, over Logan's Hardware Store, were lighted. An open stairway, its wooden steps ice-coated, ran up the side of the frame building, and Steve mounted it to the office door. He pushed the door open without knocking, and so found Stace Ballard seated by a potbellied stove reading a Kansas City newspaper.

CHAPTER IV

STEVE took a look about to make sure Ballard was alone. The office held two rolltop desks, half a dozen chairs, a small safe with its door open. A huge map of Dalton Valley was tacked to one wall. Ballard had dropped his paper and

come out of his chair, and now demanded, "What the hell do you want?"

Burly, red-faced, well-tailored, he reminded Steve of a prosperous merchant or successful banker. But the man's eyes were too hard, too shrewd for an honest man. Steve unbuttoned his coat, drew his six-gun.

"I want that grain and hay at Benton Flats," he said. "Write a paper so those farmers will release it to me."

"Damn you! This is robbery!"

"Call it what you like, Ballard," Steve said. "But there are worse crimes. Arson, for example. Or having a man murdered and fixing it so it looks as though he accidentally killed himself."

"You fool, you can't accuse me—"

"What about those two hardcases you hired to beat me up?" Steve said. "I've meant to pay you back for that, and now the time's come. Write that paper, Ballard—or I'll sure as hell gut-shoot you!"

He was bluffing, but Stace Ballard could not know that. The man was staring at the six-gun, and beads of sweat glistened suddenly on his forehead.

"All right," he muttered. "I'll sell you that grain and hay."

He turned to a desk, slumped into its chair, took up pen and paper and began to write. Steve stepped close and read the few words Ballard wrote. Blotting the paper, Ballard handed it to him.

"While I'm here, friend," Steve said, pocketing the paper, "we may as well settle something else. I want a paper showing who your backers are. Get one out of your safe, Ballard—one that names the men who hire you."

Ballard came out of his chair cursing. "I'll have the law on you," he raged. "This is armed robbery, and you'll go to the pen!"

"Get me a paper, Ballard," Steve said, and cocked his gun.

For a moment, he thought the man would jump him. Then fear got the best of Ballard's rage, and he turned to the safe. He fumbled through piles of papers, then finally held out one. Steve took it and a quick glance showed him it was the one he wanted. The letterhead was of a Kansas City banking firm, and the text of the letter urged the firm's agent, Stace Ballard, to hasten his acquisition of the Dalton Valley rangeland so that it could be incorporated in the grazing holdings already held by the banking company.

"Well, that does it, Ballard," Steve said.

Ballard was still fumbling at the safe. Now he whirled with a derringer in his hand. He almost got the short-barreled weapon to bear, but Steve's upswung boot caught him under the chin with such force that he was thrown over backward. The derringer fell to the floor. Steve picked it up, emptied it of cartridges. Ballard lay sprawled on his back, gasping and muttering, "You won't get away with this, damn you!"

Steve tossed the emptied derringer into the safe, then turned from the office. Once down the icy steps, he headed toward the livery barn at a run. He knew that he had to get out of town, take the two papers to Bell ranch, before Stace Ballard recovered sufficiently to summon the town marshal.

THE stage had gotten through from Jessup and was rolling into town as Steve was on his way to the livery barn. He had left his horse saddled, and he mounted as soon as the liveryman brought the animal from the stalls. He rode from the barn, swung south along the main street, saw the passengers climbing from the stage. And one of them was Frank Harlan.

Steve forgot all else. To hell with Bell ranch and Dalton Valley, now! This concerned himself. He reined in and swung from the saddle, and in the gloom Frank Harlan did not recognize him until they came face to face. Then he recoiled, unable to say more than, "You?"

HARLAN was a dark-haired, dark-eyed man. Coarsely handsome, he was vain in his dress and now wore a fine overcoat and a brand-new pearl-gray Stetson. Guilt and fear mingled on his swarthy face, and he kept back-

stepping until Steve grabbed hold of him.

"My money, damn you!"

"I'll pay it back, Steve. So help me, I will!"

"Hand it over. Fifteen hundred dollars!"

The other passengers from the stage halted to watch and several townsmen came running. Frank Harlan began to whine. "I'll pay you back, if you'll give me time. I lost my poke in Denver. There was a girl there, and I lost a lot at faro. But I promise—"

Steve hit him. He lost his temper and struck Frank Harlan a terrific blow on the jaw. The man collapsed with a groan, sprawling on the board sidewalk in a heap. One blow was poor payment for fifteen hundred dollars, yet Steve felt somehow satisfied. Downstreet, a man was yelling, "Marshal—somebody get Marshal Sayres!"

It was Stace Ballard.

Once again, Steve remembered Bell ranch and the papers in his pocket. He ran to his horse, caught up the reins, swung to the saddle. As the horse started out at a lope, Ballard shouted, "Stop that man!"

There was nobody ahead of Steve and, passing Matt Sayres' office, he saw that the lawman was not there. He headed out of Dalton, for Bell.

Once back at the ranch, Steve gave one of Ballard's papers to a cowpuncher with orders to saddle up and overtake the wagons that were already on their way to Benton Flats. "Tell Hank Delroy that this paper will give those farmers the authority to hand over that grain and hay."

He turned his horse over to another puncher, then hurried to the ranch house. Anne opened the door for him, and he was not blind to the relief that showed in her eyes. "You didn't—"

"Kill Ballard?" he said. "No, not that. But I got the feed away from him, and I've got a paper—" He handed it to her. "This is evidence that Ballard's been working a tinhorn scheme. Keep it and don't give it up, no matter what happens. Show it to the Pool members, and they'll be convinced that the Venturilla Land Company is a fake."

"But you, Steve?" the girl said.

"I'm leaving," he said flatly. "I've stayed too long, as it is. Ballard will have the law after me. And besides, Frank Harlan is in town." He saw the shocked look come into her eyes. "Oh, don't worry that I'll harm him. He's no longer got my money, and it'd do me no good to take it out of his hide. I'll pack my bag and clear out. If you'll let me have a horse, I'll leave it at the Dalton livery stable."

He turned from Anne and went upstairs. He threw his few things into his valise, then stepped out into the hall. He saw old Morgan Bell watching him, and he thought, *to hell with it all!* But he couldn't leave without saying goodby to the old man. He had grown fond of Morgan Bell. He stepped into the room, and Morgan Bell said, "Leaving, Steve?"

Steve stared and said, "You know?"

"I knew from the second day, when my mind cleared," the oldster said, faintly smiling. "I guess I held on all this time just to find out what you were up to. Hell, friend—your eyes are gray, and my grandson had black eyes when he was eight years old. Tonight when you high-tailed it to town, I had Anne come up here and tell me the whole blamed story. What possessed you, Steve boy?"

"I guess Anne made a fool of me."

"Fell for her, eh?"

"Hard, I reckon. But she don't give a hang about me."

Morgan Bell chuckled. "You don't know much about female critters, bucko. That girl's head-over-heels in love with you." He sobered and with his good arm reached out to the bedside table. He took up a leather pouch and handed it to Steve. "Anne tells me Frank Harlan robbed you of fifteen hundred dollars. Well, there's two thousand in gold in that poke. It'll cover what my no-good grandson took and also pay you for what you've done for Bell ranch."

"No need for you to pay Frank's debts," Steve objected.

"Take that poke and get," Morgan Bell said. "If you're going back to Arizona, take that girl with you. Or at least give her your promise that you'll send for her soon as you're settled there."

THEY looked at each other, both of them grinning, two men who were, despite the forty years' difference in their ages, much alike. Steve put the gold-filled poke into his valise, shook Morgan Bell's hand, and left the room and the house. Outside, Anne was waiting with the buckboard to drive him into town.

"You talked to Morgan Bell," Steve said.

"It was time. He knew all the time that you weren't Frank Harlan," Anne replied. "It was foolish of me to have tried to deceive him."

They were away from the ranch, driving over the snow-covered town road, and their manner and speech were awkward. They were like two strangers trying to strike up a conversation. Steve had so much to say, now that he was leaving, yet he couldn't find the proper words. And Anne for once was not her quick-witted self.

"It's cold," Steve finally said, to say something.

"Not so cold as it's been," came Anne's reply. "There's a warm wind."

It was true, but Steve hadn't noticed until now. He hoped the wind would bring a thaw. He said, "Arizona now—"

"Yes?"

"Well, I have a little place close to Black Mesa. I've been thinking I might fix it up. There's just a 'dobe hut, but I could turn it into a mighty nice ranch house. Of course, if a person like Wyoming—"

"I guess," said Anne, "a person could get used to Arizona."

That was as close as they got to saying the important thing. Three horsebackers suddenly appeared ahead, coming toward them at a hard lope. Seeing the Bell rig, the trio slowed up and then reined in. It was Dalton's town marshal, old Matt Sayres, and two men who wore badges to show that they had been sworn in as deputies. Anne halted the team, and said:

"Looking for somebody from Bell, Matt?"

"Yeah. The man with you—Frank Harlan," Sayres said flatly. He and his two deputies were staring at Steve. "You armed, Mister?"

"A six-gun under my coat," Steve said. "But if you're arresting me on Stace Ballard's say-so, it won't stick. That tinhorn's done in these parts, and he'll never appear against me in court."

"Ballard claims you forced him to turn over some private paper to you," Matt Sayres growled, "and he wants it back. But I'm taking you in on a more serious charge." He motioned to one of his deputies and told him to take the arrested man's gun. When that was done, he went on, "A stranger came in on today's stage. You picked a fight with him soon as he climbed out of the coach. A dozen people were witnesses."

"All right, I admit it. I knocked that hombre down."

"You did more than that, Mister. You back-shot him and left him for dead."

CHAPTER V

STEVE heard Anne gasp, "No—*no!*" He stared at Matt Sayres, saying nothing, too jolted to speak. The deputy who had Steve's gun said, "Five loads in this Colt, and an empty cartridge under the hammer. Maybe he carries his weapon that way, for safety. Some gun-wise hombres do."

"Steve, you didn't—" Anne asked, her eyes pleading.

"No, I swear it," Steve said, still watching Matt Sayres. "Marshal, I didn't back-shoot anybody. Who says I did?"

"It's the way things look," the old lawman said. "This stranger comes to town, and you're the only person seeming to know him. You knock him down, then high-tail it when Stace Ballard and some others yell for me. I help pick up

the stranger. He says he's all right, and asks where he can get a horse. He goes to the livery barn, then rides from town by the south road. I'm in my office when the shot sounds. Everybody heard it. We found the stranger lying on the road, unconscious. We took him to Doc Burton's house."

"So you figure I ambushed him?"

"You got a grudge against him," Sayres said flatly. "I figure you knew he'd take the south road, and so bushed up to wait for him. You're under arrest for attempted murder. If that gent dies, the charge will be murder—and you'll no doubt hang. Who is that stranger, anyway?"

"Frank Harlan," Steve said. "Morgan Bell's grandson."

One of the deputies swore. Matt Sayres exclaimed, "He's—who?"

"That's right, marshal," Steve said. His voice was jerky, for he was caught up by fear. He was a man caught in a trap. "My name's Steve Kerrigan, and that hombre is the real Frank Harlan. But I didn't backshoot him. I swear it!"

Sayres shook his head, muttered, "I'm all mixed up. All the same, I've got to take you in. We'll head for town."

A little crowd gathered on the street when Matt Sayres brought his prisoner in, but there was nothing threatening in its manner. Dalton had long ago lost its wildness and was content to let the law and the courts take care of the law-breakers.

Anne went along into the marshal's office, and Steve no longer could have any doubts about how she felt toward him. She was pale and upset, but her wavering smile told him that she had faith in his denial of guilt. The two deputies stood by the closed door. The crowd peered in through the window.

Matt Sayres sat down in his desk chair and said, "Now let's get at the bottom of this."

Steve had no chance to explain why he had been posing as Morgan Bell's grandson, for there was a sudden commotion at the door. Stace Ballard wanted in, and the deputies held him at the door until Matt Sayres said, "Let him in."

Ballard's bulky person seemed to crowd the little office. With his arrogant air, he moved to the center of the room. "You get back my paper, marshal?"

"Not yet," Sayres said. "Kerrigan, you got a paper belonging to Mr. Ballard? He claims you took one from him at pistol point."

Steve watched Ballard and did not answer.

Sayres said wearily, "John, search the prisoner."

John Ashley, one of the deputies, stepped forward and went through Steve's clothes. The other deputy searched through his valise, showing the marshal the gold-filled leather pouch the bag held. Neither man found Ballard's paper. Ballard cursed, blustered.

"He gave it to this girl!" he shouted. "I want her searched!"

"Calm down, friend," Matt Sayres said. "We can't search Anne Delroy on your say-so. Besides, I've got more to worry about than some fool paper. This man's being held for attempted murder."

BALLARD ranted like a wild man, demanding that Anne be held under arrest so that she couldn't make use of the paper. He swore he would have Matt Sayres kicked out of office if the old lawman didn't co-operate.

Finally, Sayres said, "Boys, show Mr. Ballard the door."

The door opened at that moment and young Doc Burton stepped in. He was a short, stout man with a round and cheerful face. He said at once, "Marshal, I've saved the law the trouble of hanging a murderer. My patient will live. He's conscious now, and maybe you want to talk to him."

Stace Ballard left the office of his own accord, hurriedly. Matt Sayres got from his chair, saying, "Kerrigan and I will step over to your place, Doc."

"Kerrigan?" said Doc Burton. "I thought he was Frank Harlan."

"It's a story I ain't yet heard," the

lawman said, and gestured for Steve to walk ahead of him.

Doc Burton's house was but a short distance up the street. Arriving there, the medico led Matt Sayres and Steve Kerrigan into a bedroom. The lamp was turned low. The man on the bed had a blanched look. He did not move except to turn his head slightly to look at his visitors. Steve was suddenly struck by the resemblance Frank Harlan bore old Morgan Bell.

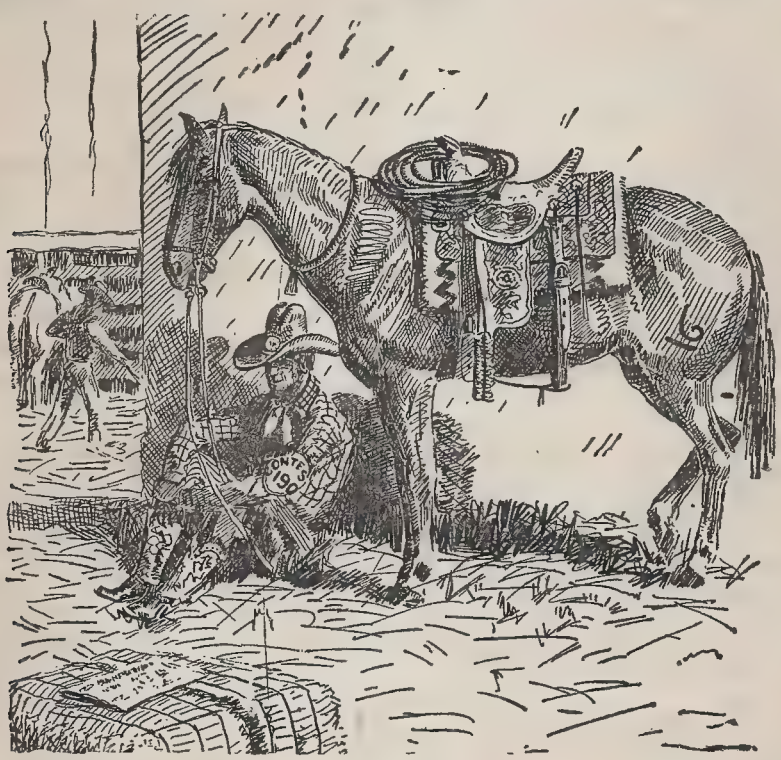
you say, you go to Bell, once you're healed up, and work that spread for the old gentleman."

"Sure, Steve, I'll do it," Frank Harlan said, and seemed to mean it.

Matt Sayres was looking more and more mixed up, and he said now, "Stranger, did you get a look at the dirty son that ambushed you?"

"Yes, I did, marshal."

"Was it this hombre—this Steve Kerrigan?"



Frank said weakly, "Look, Steve—"

"Easy, Frank," Steve cautioned. "Don't get worked up."

Frank wouldn't heed the advice. He said, "About that money I stole from you—I aim to pay it back, every cent of it. I've been a wild one, a no-good, but when I thought I was going to die—well, I made up my mind that if I could pull through I'd turn over a new leaf. I guess I sort of prayed."

"It's all right, Frank. That money has been paid back. Old Morgan Bell paid it to me," Steve said. "If you mean what

Frank Harlan still did not move, but his eyes widened in surprise. "Steve? Hell, no. He wouldn't back-shoot a man. It was an hombre I don't know, but I saw him here in town, on the street, just before I got a horse and rode out. A fattish sort of dude, with a red face."

"Who'd that be?" Sayres asked, looking at Steve.

"Stace Ballard, marshal."

"What?"

"I'd gamble on it." Steve said. "Ballard saw me jump Frank, who was a stranger to Dalton. Ballard couldn't know that I

wasn't really Morgan Bell's grandson, so he figured the man I knocked down was just somebody I had a grudge against. I'd already got out of town with that paper of Ballard's, and he figured that maybe he couldn't stop me from using it against him—unless he got me in a real jam with the law. So he goes out the south road and bushes up, shoots the stranger in the back when he comes riding along—knowing I'll be blamed. It would have worked, if Doc Burton hadn't saved Frank's life."

"You mean to say Stace Ballard would kill a man over that paper?"

"That paper will ruin Ballard and his Venturilla Land Company," Steve said. "You fetch Ballard over here for Frank to identify."

Matt Sayres nodded uncertainly. Steve shook Frank Harlan's hand, told him that the past was forgotten, then followed the marshal to the street. At the lawman's office, Sayres said, "Give Kerrigan back his gun and let him go. He's in the clear."

ONCE Sayres and the deputies were gone to find Stace Ballard, Steve and Anne lingered there in the office. Steve said, "Frank Harlan will take over Bell ranch, soon as he recovers, so I won't be needed there. Gramps will need you until Frank gets there, so I'm not asking you to come to Arizona right off. But I'll come back for you, when you write."

"I'll write as soon as I can possibly leave," Anne promised.

So it was agreed between them. They left the office, and Steve saw Anne drive away in the buckboard. He went to the livery barn and made a deal for a horse so that he could ride to Jessup. He wanted to get away from Dalton at once, instead of waiting for tomorrow's stage. He had no liking for the town, and he'd tired of the cold that gripped this Wyoming range.

He rode away from the livery barn, took the north road out of town. He glanced back from the edge of Dalton and saw Matt Sayres and his deputies crossing the street. They did not have Stace Ballard with them.

Riding on along the snow-covered road, Steve realized the weather was changing. There was a warm wind. The snow and ice were turning to slush. The Dalton range had suffered greatly, but it seemed that the worst of its trouble would soon be over. Steve was approaching a wooden bridge over a narrow creek when his horse spooked. Some warning must have reached his own mind, for he automatically reached inside his coat and drew his six-gun. The next instant he saw a figure crouching behind some ice-encrusted brush near the bridge.

Ballard!

He knew without knowing how it came to his mind. The man had fled town on learning that the man he had bushwhacked had not died. Perhaps caught up by panic, Ballard had left on foot. Now he was hiding, waiting for a rider to come along so that he could obtain a horse.

Suddenly Steve hated the man. He flung a curse at him through the darkness, and for answer Ballard fired at him. Steve felt the passage of the bullet, so close had it come. He swung his six-gun up and fired as Ballard's weapon blazed a second time. He was surprised to find himself unhit, but he was not surprised to see Ballard's bulky form topple and roll down the creek bank. He waited, but no more shots came from Ballard's gun. The man who had wanted to own a whole range now lay dead on a tiny portion of it.

Matt Sayres and his deputies came riding up. The marshal said, "We picked up those two hardcases who worked for Ballard, but we didn't find him. Who were you shooting at?"

"There in the creek," Steve said.

"Ballard?"

Steve didn't answer. He holstered his gun and rode on, and he told himself that when he returned for Anne Delroy, they would have to meet in Jessup. He kept finding too much trouble at this back-country cowtown of Dalton.

Ghost-Town Gamble

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

Ghosts walked in Espectro the night Ben Hallet rode into that long-dead boom town to avenge his old amigo's killing. But those ghosts were gun-hung, and Hallet had to risk finding out what live lead would do to phantom .45's.

BEN HALLET rode into Espectro town just at sunset. And from the minute he topped the last rise he was notched in gunsights. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the lookout, Tace Mander, jerk suddenly erect in a pocket of the big lava dome and tuck his cheek against the stock of his .30-30.

Hallet well knew what Tace could do with that rifle; but you'd never be able to guess it from his manner. He rode with an air of quiet, grim dignity, easy in the saddle and unhurried, along the street of the ghost town that had become the hangout of Slash Dermody's

bunch. A young rannyhan, just past twenty-two but marked by the kicking around he'd had in this world, he wore Perk Lindsay's ball-pointed star on his shirt and new twin Colts low-slung on his thighs.

He had almost reached the Nugget Hotel, a weathered old building with half of its balcony hanging askew, when Rolf Tweed came barging out into the street.

Tweed was a squat, broad hombre who tried to cover his downright ugliness with conchas and silk shirts and finery. He had his gun out, held high and ready.

"Stop where you're at, pilgrim!" he bellowed. "What in hell you think you're doin', ridin' in here like— Why, damn if it ain't the kid, come back home!"

That brought the rest of them: a dozen-odd men, pouring out of the saloon that occupied more than half of the ground floor of the hotel building. Cold-eyed men, all of them packing the subtle but plain brand of the owlhoot.

Slash Dermody was the second man out. Towering, so gaunt that he bragged no man could hit him in a gunfight, the leader of the wild bunch had a long jaw and a scar which ran from his temple down to the left corner of his mouth.

His narrowed eyes sized up the new arrival.

"Well, Ben," he said. "Get homesick for the bunch?"

"Not any," Hallet stated. Almost reverently, he touched Perk Lindsay's star. "I came out to get you, Dermody—for the murder of old Perk Lindsay. You shot him in the back, out there on his claim where he was diggin' gold. You tore his shack apart, lookin' for his cache of dust and nuggets. You didn't find it; but you dropped your hideout gun, the one with your initials engraved on it."

Hallet tossed the little derringer to Dermody's feet.

The outlaw's mouth twitched. "Well, so they hung the star on you. Figure you're comin' up in the world, since Lindsay took you under his wing an' give you a job. Talkin' nice an' proper now. Been eatin' regular, I see. Just how you figure on takin' me in?"

Hallet knew better than to reach for his guns. "Well, I—"

He faltered. And Rolf Tweed let loose a guffaw. "Let Tace put a bullet behind his ear, Slash! Teach the ungrateful whelp that we—"

"No." Dermody's face was twisting into a smile now. There was humor in this wild bunch; a raw humor that teetered on an invisible edge, ready to drop to the bedrock of cold-eyed murder. "He's the sheriff now, boys. We got to treat him proper."

DERMODY made a little gesture. A rope snaked down from the rickety balcony, dropped its loop about Hallet's shoulders and yanked tight, pinning his arms to his sides.

Tweed was quick to get into the spirit of the thing. He gave a whoop, fired a shot into the air. Hallet's horse spooked up, reared and wheeled. The sheriff was jerked from the saddle. He landed heavily in the dust, rolled over.

They swarmed onto him then. Kicking and pummeling, they wrenched his new guns from the holsters, jostled each other for the opportunity to land punishing blows.

"That'll be plenty, boys—for the greetin'," Dermody ordered. "Stand 'im up, see if he's got a hideout gun."

They stood him up, felt under his armpits and under his belt for a derringer. "He ain't got one, Slash," Tweed reported.

Then, while two of them held Hallet's arms pinioned behind him, Slash Dermody sauntered close.

"Was you tryin' to run a whizzer, kid, by circlin' around through the badlands an' across the creek, to come at us from the west? Pretty feeble—you should have knowed that Tace can see in all directions from up there on the lava. I'm some surprised at you—figured I'd brought you up to be smarter than that. Hurts my feelin's too, havin' you turn on me this way after I took you in, a homeless button, an' treated you kindly."

"After you murdered my folks!" Hallet retorted. "An' you kicked me around for nine years. Made me do all your dirty work an' take all the hoorawin' anybody could think up!"

"We only wanted to develop your character," Dermody said, his mouth twitching. "I never did figure out how you snuck away from us, that time we made the raid over at the Quarter-Circle J. Nor how come that prospectin' sheriff happened to take a longrider under his wing."

"Maybe you never would savvy a thing like that." Ben Hallet had a vivid memory of the day of the raid. There'd been a lot of shooting, in the smoke of burning ranch buildings and haystacks. He'd managed to break away, and he'd ridden straight into town to give himself up.

Sheriff Perk Lindsay, a game little old-timer, had listened to his story. Had done some talking to the judge—and instead of a jail sentence, Hallet came out with a job on Lindsay's claim. The sheriff, an old prospector, just couldn't leave a likely gravel bar alone. When his deputy quit to take up a homestead, Lindsay shifted Hallet to that job. There'd been some talk, of course. Folks questioned the sheriff's judgment in pinning the badge on a longrider.

Sheriff Perkins Lindsay drew himself up to his full five-five and inquired, "Who should know the ways of those hombres any better?"

And Hallet lived down the talk. He plugged along for two years, wishing that there was some way of getting at Dermody's bunch, forted up in Espectro town, without needing an army to do the chore. Lindsay, who pointed out that the ghost town was across the county line anyway, spent more and more time on his claim. And he'd made a fairly good strike—a pocket with coarse dust and some flat, flashy-looking nuggets.

SOMEHOW Dermody heard of that, and made his play. But he hadn't found Lindsay's little cache of gold, located under a rock a dozen steps from his shack.

Hallet winced at the memory of finding the sheriff's bullet-riddled body, there by the creek.

Dermody was peering at him, with that half-humorous grin of his. But the bunch was getting restless.

"Let's stretch a rope with 'im!" Tweed boomed. "That's what they done to Pete Lassler, in town, when they caught 'im b'fore he could high-tail back here after that stage holdup. All he done was kill a drummer. Let's even the score!"

Dermody's eyes glowed. "Tweed, for once you got an idea between your ears. We'll treat this ungrateful hombre just like he'd treat one of us, was he to catch us in *his* town. Only we'll do the job right an' proper! First thing we do, we have a trial. Hustle 'im inside, boys!"

Limping painfully, Hallet was herded up the steps and into the saloon.

"Hurt your leg?" Tweed hoorawed. "Pretty quick it'll be your neck painin' you!"

Hallet paid no attention to that. He limped meekly into the saloon. This was where Dermody's bunch spent most of their time, when they weren't out raiding a bank or express shipment a couple hundred miles away or killing a sodbuster to get his wagonload of supplies. But the place hadn't changed much since Hallet saw it last.

The big, cracked back-bar mirrors were still covered with dust and cobwebs. The long mahogany bar, the pride of Espectro town in the boom days, was dirty and stained by spilled whisky. The floor wasn't as clean as Hallet had kept it.

Old "Quinsy" Barton, the one member of the bunch who hadn't gone out to greet the new arrival, was bracing himself against the bar and making a wobbly effort to light a lamp. He turned, blinked bleary eyes at Hallet. He drew himself up with the ridiculous dignity of a drunken fat man.

"Young fella," he said in the hoarse wheeze that was all a passing bullet had left of his voice, "don't you know lawmen ain't welcome in our town?"

"Shut up, Quinsy," Dermody ordered. "And get behind that bar. You always

wanted to be a judge—now you are one. We got a case for you to try. Just like they do in town, savvy? With all the legal trimmin's."

Quinsy's red-veined face sagged in astonishment, but he did as he was told. He made his way around the end of the bar, picking up a bottle as he went. Behind the bar he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, pounded the butt of his cutter on the bar for order.

"Court's in session!" he announced. "By damn, I've had this done to me often enough, I ought to know the ropes. What's the idee of comin' back to our bailiwick, Ben? Figger you're so high an' mighty now, with a tin star on your chest, that we'll all just wilt when you arch your neck?"

"I aim to take Dermody in," Hallet stated doggedly. "For the murder of—"

The rest of it was drowned out by the guffaw of ugly mirth that ran through the bunch. Quinsy banged on the bar.

"Got to have a jury," he said importantly. "Ain't legal without a jury. We gotta have twelve hombres—"

"Hell," somebody retorted, "we're all the jury. An' I get them boots of his when we get through with 'im!"

"All right," Quinsy said. "Now, Ben, how do you plead? Guilty or not guilty—not that it matters a damn. We'll hang you anyway, just like they do over in Pronto Wells. By hell, the shoe's on the other foot this time, ain't it, boys?"

PRESSING his lips together, Hallet said nothing. Slash Dermody grinned wickedly, belted Hallet on the side of the head with the barrel of his gun. The blow was just hard enough to hurt plenty, to bring blood and start the lawman's head to ringing—not quite hard enough to knock him out.

"Better speak up," Dermody advised.

"I got nothing to say to you hombres," Hallet retorted. "Except that I'll get the coyote that killed ol' man Lindsay if it's the last thing I—"

Dermody struck him again, harder this time. Hallet reeled. But his arms still were bound to his sides; and he was pinioned by Tweed and another of the outlaws.

Quinsy banged his gun on the mahogany. "I think I heard 'im say guilty. Ben Hallet, this here court sentences you to get hung to that cottonwood down in the draw. Court's adjourned—say, what was he charged with, boys?"

Dermody said, "Double-crossin' the bunch that fed him, the whelp. We'll throw in disturbin' the peace an' vagrancy for good measure."

Quinsy nodded. "Serious charges, boys. Now let's go see how he prances on air!"

That brought a roar of enthusiastic agreement. There was a general rush for the door; but Slash Dermody blocked it.

"Hold on, you fools! It's near dark outside—an' I aim to see this rannyhan stretch twine myself! Besides—" Dermody's thin mouth twitched—"they don't put a man out of his misery that quick, when it's done legal. They let him sit in a calaboose an' think about it awhile."

"Hell, Slash," Quinsy apologized, "I plumb forgot about you bein' nightblind, there for a minute. Throw the prisoner in the coop, boys. We'll string 'im up in the mornin'."

There'd been humor, too, in the men who built Espectro town during its short-lived boom. They built their jail into the end of the saloon, where a prisoner could watch the goings-on and work up a good thirst—and be watched, and taunted.

They put Ben Hallet into the single cell, slammed and locked the barred door. Slash Dermody pocketed the key, and grinned through the bars.

"That'll hold you, lawman. Now sit down an' see how it feels to know that you're going to get hung."

Hallet freed himself of the rope, limped over to the low bench and sat down. His head still was ringing. He wiped blood from his ear, gingerly felt of the wound made by the front sight of Dermody's gun. But he fought to suppress the slight hint of a grin that kept tugging at the corner of his mouth.

It was a noisy evening, there in Espectro town. The boys had gotten an ample supply of liquor from somewhere. They drank, bragged, told lies, and occasionally came over to taunt the prisoner.

A game of draw poker was started at a table. Chips clicked faintly. Slash Dermody sent a man out to take Tace Mander's place as lookout.

Then the leader of the wild bunch said, "Time you was goin' for water, Rolf. You got enough matches?"

That was a job everybody disliked. But it had to be done. Once every day, after the heat released its grip on the lavas, somebody had to take the packmule to the waterhole in the creek a long mile to the west, and get a half barrel of water.

WHEN Ben Hallet was with the wild bunch, it had been his job most of the time. Now, it seemed like, they were alternating; and Rolf Tweed didn't like his chore.

The squat hombre protested, "It ain't my turn again a'ready! By hell, I ain't takin' that ornery mule critter nowhere! I got me a good hand of cards here, an' I—"

Dermody's thin face went grim. His eyes were slitted, dangerous. "Get movin', Rolf," he said in a flat voice.

The gunman swallowed, put his cards on the table, and pushed back his chair. He went out without saying another word.

Time dragged—it seemed like hours to the tensely waiting Hallet. After a while Dermody tired of the game, cashed in and came over to the door of the cell.

"Regrettin' that you tried to pull off such a fool stunt?" he inquired. "You'd need a posse big as a young army, to come in here an' get me. At that, you'd geet fooled, happen so. Because while the boys was puttin' up a fight I'd vamoose into the lavas. Nobody but a *tonto* would make a stab at what you tried tonight. Now you can squirm—"

A quick tattoo of hoofs, outside, pulled Dermody around. His lean hand darted to his cutter; but it was Rolf Tweed who burst into the saloon. The squat gunman was breathing hard. His eyes were wild. He clutched something in his hand. Before Tweed could get his breath to speak, Dermody said:

"Where's that water? You couldn't pull that blasted mule along as fast as you were ridin'. You left him out there—now we'll have to put in two days trackin' him down, like the last time he got away."

"Hell with that mule!" Tweed gasped. "An' the water too. Look what I found, boys! By hell, they was right there in the gravel, in the bottom of the crick! Look!"

He banged two thin, shiny gold nuggets, about the size of silver dollars, onto the mahogany. "Feast your eyes on 'em, boys! When I struck a match, like a man has to do to keep from fallin' into the crick while he dips the water, I seen 'em shinin' right at me! I seen more, deeper in the crick! By hell, there's no tellin' how many—"

The outlaws made a rush toward the bar. All but old Quinsy Barton, who'd looked at the bottom of one too many bottles and was sleeping noisily at a dust-covered table.

Dermody made a path through the crowd, grabbed for the nuggets. But Tweed was a shade the quicker; the squat gunhawk grabbed the nuggets and pocketed them.

"No you don't!" he warned. "I found 'em, didn't I? They're mine! By hell, gimme some more matches, somebody. I'm goin' to get somethin' to rake 'em off the bottom, go back out there—"

He looked wildly around, grabbed the first chair that came handy and smashed it across the bar. Carrying the back portion of it, he went legging out to his horse.

Excitement—the kind of excitement that had built Espectro town in the beginning, years ago—raced through the wild bunch. Men looked at each other, swallowed, then raced after Tweed. There were shouts, outside.

The lookout, aroused by the commotion, yelled, "Hey, what's happened?"

Somebody shouted, "Tweed found nuggets in the crick! Buckets of 'em!"

"Wait a minute — don't take my horse! I'm goin' along, too!"

Dermody stepped to the door, then. "Damn you, Tibbetts, you stay put! You're on lookout!"

There was no answer. Every man in the bunch knew that Dermody could do nothing at night. While he could see all right in daylight, he couldn't see a thing at night. Not even enough to keep from falling off a horse.

Ben Hallet, in his cell, knelt and fumbled feverishly with one of his boots. He heard the clatter of hoofs fade away.

SILENCE closed in on Espectro town, broken only by Quinsy's peaceful snores. Slash Dermody shrugged, turned back to the bar, poured himself a drink. A man needed a little time to think this new development over. The protesting creak of a board somewhere at the back of the long room jerked him alert. He put down his drink, swung, strode to the door of the cell.

"Hallet! Damn you, Ben, where are you?" he demanded.

He still was there, rattling the barred door angrily, when Ben Hallet came in.

"Right here, Slash. Put up your hands —I'm takin' you in like I told you."

Dermody winced; then he seemed to freeze to his tracks. He let out a long breath. Then, slowly, his head turned.

"If you're wonderin' how I got out of there," Ben Hallet said, "I remembered findin' a loose board at the back of the cell, once when I was swampin' out this place. Now you're going to—"

Dermody's gaunt face was expressionless, as he peered over his shoulder. But his slitted eyes saw that Hallet's holsters still were empty.

"You damned young fool," he grated, whirling and making a lightning-fast grab for his own gun. The iron seemed to leap from the leather. It bucked, blasted out a spurt of flame.

But Ben Hallet was dropping, even as Dermody whirled. Just to play safe. Dermody's slug went over the sheriff's head, partly because he'd dropped down and partly because the little derringer almost hidden in his hand had let go a split second before Dermody fired.

Dermody's gun-hand was suddenly a quivering, bloody mess, flung back against the bars by the impact of the derringer's slug. His cutter thudded to the floor. While Dermody clutched at his smashed hand, his face twitching with pain and astonishment and rage, Hallet darted forward through swirling layers of gunsmoke and scooped up the .45.

Dust, dislodged by the shooting, was cascading from the back bar. Old Quinsy Barton gave a mumbled groan of protest, stirred, settled down to his snoring. Ben Hallet gave Dermody a grim smile.

"A hideout gun," he said. "You didn't even notice it in my hand. You didn't expect me to have one—and I learned that trick from you. I reckon your eyes ain't too good in lamplight either."

Hallet nodded. "Had something else in there to keep it company." With his left hand he took a shiny gold nugget from his pocket. He backed carefully to Quinsy's table, put the nugget under the drunken man's nose. "That'll maybe jar your boys into realizin' that they got roped in for a whizzer."

"You put them nuggets in the crick!" Dermody grated. "Knowin' somebody'd find 'em when he went after water, an' knowin' it would start a stampede that would leave me here alone. You damn well knew I couldn't see at night. So you figured, likewise, we wouldn't hang you till mornin'."

"You're callin' the cards, Slash. I'd heard you brag, often enough, that if you ever caught a lawman you'd treat him exactly like they all hankered to treat you."

"But why'd you take a risky shot at my hand?" Dermody demanded.

"Maybe I wanted to make certain you'd hang. I figure ol' Perk wouldn't mind me usin' some of his gold for this job. An' I aim to see to it that they hang you by daylight. I want you to get a good look at that rope. Start movin', Slash. You're makin' a long ride tonight, tied to your saddle so you can't fall off even if you hanker to."

Two mistakes on the murderer's part showed a keen-eyed sheriff the trigger trail marked by a . . .

Badman's Blunder

By Earl W. Scott

BART FOLEY made his second mistake when he shot the burro. Easier to have turned the critter loose to lose himself in the wild terrain. Far wiser, too. But living and let live wasn't big Bart's way. The jack had served his purpose toting water and grub for two days over the hump of Superstition Ridge, so he killed him, shoving his carcass over the cliff's edge.

The odd thing was, Bart thought he was really smart.

"Let some nosy lawman find the limpin' jack now," he muttered, blistered

lips twisting in his pockmarked face.

And error number one hadn't been so much tne murder of Apache Jake, the burro's owner, rather than the method of the crime. That gullible old breed had acted Samaritan when Bart stumbled half starved into his lone diggings up Crazy Woman Gulch the previous night. He'd babbled as lonely men will, about his new color strike, while feeding and watering the stranger. The more fool he, with a fat poke of dust and nuggets hung round his scrawny neck.

Well, old Jake had finally rolled up in his blankets beside the dying fire and soon a sock on the head had forever stopped his snoring. Pitching the body of the old moccasin-footed breed under a shallow rock ledge near by, Bart tossed in a few spadefuls of earth and pine needles for good measure.

And there'd been no hurry in leaving the remote camp. Dawn was soon enough and he'd taken off with Jake's grub and canteens bundled awkwardly onto the lame burro's back along with pick and shovel. The tools could be disposed of later. No use leaving any sign around. Thanks to Jake's talk the night before, he could orient himself. It might be tough going up through Crazy Woman Gulch, but it was miles closer to the north side of the range. That had appealed to Big Bart Foley, too.

EVENING of the second day found Bart crouching over a smudging fire frying the last of Jake's fat bacon. Swabbing at red-rimmed eyes, he cursed bitterly his aching bones and throbbing feet, so swollen in new scuffed boots he couldn't pull them off. Most of all, however, he was maligning Apache Jake for ever mentioning such a route. The towering canyon boasted a dozen rock slides. These had spewed boulders and twisted tree trunks over an already choked and unmarked trail. And there was no telling how far he'd come. Maybe a dozen miles; taking a wrong turn where the canyon forked had led to a blind box and cost him the best of yesterday.

Now the grub was gone and most of the water. He glowered sullenly at the fuming side-meat. Red steaks and hard liquor waiting at Dragoon City made his mouth water. But Jake's fat poke, sweating warmly heavy on its suspended neck thong beneath his shirt, was doing small good in these hellish hills.

Ears far from trail-wise failed to detect the approach of the lone horseman. And the erect, hard-visaged rider was almost upon him before Bart whirled, clawing for his low-slung Colts.

"Easy there, pard," drawled a slow voice, keen eyes under the low-tugged Stetson registering the hostile action. He slid a lank, six-foot frame stiffly from the saddle.

Bart's puffy lips sucked slow breath as he glimpsed the star centering the other's worn vest.

"Could use some of that coffee." The tall man's voice was casual. He squatted by the fire eyeing the blackened pot suggestively.

Bart's scowl remained but after a moment he spoke grudgingly.

"Drink 'er from the pot, then. There ain't no cup."

The stranger shrugged. "Morgan's the name. Matt Morgan." He set the steaming pot free of the coals for cooling. For the moment Bart's bloodshot eyes veered, searching the back trail. No second rider showed there. The law dog appeared alone. Seemed in no hurry to go for the shooting-iron sagging the scarred hip holster.

Ground-hitched, beyond the fire the head of the lathered bay drooped wearily. A slow chuckle grew in Bart Foley's throat. He shifted, grunting, to mask the murder light in his eyes. He'd worried about clearing the hills. Well, here was his chance. Damn tired, he was hoofing it in these tight boots. With a well-placed slug—

"That's one hell of a trail," the other was saying.

"Yeah," retorted Bart. "No place for a horse, that is—" he lifted heavy shoulders—"onless a feller was really anxious to git somewhere."

Their glances clashed across the dying blaze. Morgan rose, booting the sprawling half-turned sticks into the flame.

"Hoofin' must be worse, as you should know," he added lightly.

"Where I go is nobody's damn business." Bart spit into the growing blaze. "Just happens I got a camp back yonder." He gestured vaguely. "Was takin' a shortcut into Dragoon City; grubstake's petered out."

He rose, yawning and stretching. He'd be seconds quicker to a draw that way. He was not trusting this level-eyed hombre, nor any other law dog, and there was just one way to get that horse.

LOWERING his long arms from the stretch, Bart kneaded chest and belly with calloused palms, blending the circular movement into a swift claw for his holster.

"Easy, pard!"

Bart froze, staring open-mouthed into the muzzle of Morgan's gun.

"Somethin' on your mind, Mister—somethin' like a horse?"

Bart swallowed, making no answer, hunkering slowly down by the fire again. His hot darting eyes were still mirroring the lightning of the other's draw.

"Sort of new to these parts, eh?" Morgan crossed his legs Turk fashion, gun in his lap. He was apparently bent on conversation. Reaching for the cooling coffee, he swigged a long draught.

Bart's eyes were sullen as he watched, "Said I was prospectin', didn't I?"

Morgan nodded slowly. "Thought I heard wrong, maybe." He thumbed the untidy fire. "I was just thinkin' no desert rat ever built that."

"Yeah? What's wrong with it?"

Morgan shrugged. "Dude built, that's all. Laid flat, that way, it smokes. Now stacked, with a coupla rocks—forget it," he finished wearily.

"Kinda smart, ain't you?" scoffed Bart.

"Kinda, when I'm travelin' my own country. You'd likely savvy travelin' yours." His probing glance lifted from contemplation of the other's scuffed, yet obviously new, Justin boots. "Arkansas, wasn't it?"

Bart's whiskered face blanched; a dry tongue raced his lips.

"What you gettin' at?" he half whispered.

"Hard figurin' a mountain man plantin' a body under a foot of ground in these hills without a rock cairn over it," added Morgan. "Lobos had fished out Apache Jake's bones and picked 'em clean when I reached his camp site this mornin', and that peeled, crushed skull wasn't pretty," he finished.

"Jake?" Bart swallowed hard. "Apache Jake? Who's he?"

But Morgan ignored the question. "Bad enough," he continued, "for an hombre to go trailin' two days with the old breed's burro. Everybody around Florence knew Apache Jake and that lame jack, 'Step-and-a-Half,' we called 'im. Sported an off gait with his hind leg."

"Look, law dog," snarled Bart, "I don't get your talk. Somethin' about a feller with a cracked skull and a lame jackass."

". . . Plumb up to the hogback old Step-and-a-Half goes," ground on Morgan, "and what do you know? At the highest point, against all burro logic, he topples over. Must have been his load had got so light that this hombre trailin' figured he could tote it faster himself. Yeah, an' him wearin' new boots, too. Same bein' clear from his tracks."

He paused, loose body slumping, wholly belied by the intent watchful eyes on the tensed figure of the other man. Then he added, "You see everything this hombre does is wrong. Why didn't he weight Jake's body down with rocks so it would stay there? Why didn't he remember old Apache wore moccasins?" His own boots gave him away the first hundred yards.

"Toppin' that, he pushes the burro off the cliff, and, as that took some doin', shoots him first."

BART'S jaw sagged and for a moment the fear of a trapped rat clawed at his vitals. This law dog must have seen him, otherwise . . .

"Not too hard to guess," offered Morgan. "Found the kicked-out cartridge where the poor jack went over. Lastly,

Foley—" Morgan's lank body straightened—"too bad you chose just this time to rob old Jake and kill 'im."

"Foley!" Sound of his own name on the sheriff's lips curdled Bart's blood. So Morgan knew!

He was speaking again, but Bart scarcely sensed the words.

"My mission in coming into these hills was to find old Jake. You see, Arizona's got a law statin' any prospector must check out through our office, namin' the time he intends bein' away. Old Jake had told me of his new find, that it would take him six weeks at the outside. His time ran out the first of the month, so I came huntin'."

As he crouched there across the fire, Bart's hot eyes were focused on the sheriff's gun-hand. His own fingers worked nervously inches from a draw, but he wasn't fool enough to move them closer.

"My route lay north through Coyote Springs," the other continued, "and I picked up some new information there."

Bart's hands had stilled now. Damned if the other hadn't gone for makin's. He was rolling a cigarette while he talked. "Seems a con had broken out of the pen at Folsom, two or three days previously, killin' a guard in his getaway. What's more, he knocked over a store in Coyote Springs, shuckin' his cell togs for Levis and new boots. Word got around he'd hit for the Superstitions—"

Morgan's voice dribbled off. The cigarette showed now between his lips and the thumbed match lifted toward a light. With a blurted curse Bart went for his gun. Jerked free, it kicked flame.

But something was wrong. Only for an instant was he conscious of the fuming gun that had sprung to the sheriff's hand, of the fact that his own shot had scattered harmless fagots in the fire. Then his big body was following. Sagging slowly forward, it pitched sprawling over the sputtering flames. There rose the sickish odor of burning flesh, but Bart Foley wasn't noticing.

Morgan's face was suddenly haggard and sweat cooled his temples as slowly he holstered his gun. Rising, he dragged Bart's body free of the fire, stood staring at it.

"Game of nerves," he muttered. Foley couldn't know he'd only *read* of the prison break in the paper, that it was thought the escaped prisoner had struck south for the border. That another suspect had been tagged in the adjoining county in the Coyote Springs affair. An hombre, likely, wearing new boots. A fairly common thing in the range country.

Stooping, he fished the poke from around the dead man's neck. He eyed it thoughtfully. "Gold," he thought, "and buckskin." What to prove that even this had been Apache Jake's? Only sharp boot heels on the trail of a wandering burro. Suspicion and actual proof were two different stories. Arizona juries were hard-headed. Sheriff Morgan knew that to his sorrow. But Bart Foley had written his own ticket.

Tossing a blanket over the man, Morgan turned, sliding the saddle from his horse. There was no hurry now and a couple of hours' rest were essential. . . .

It was a tough trail down the mountain.

Cash Cameron was fed up with being a go-between for the Phantom Gang of holdup hombres. But when Cash tried to break away, the holster herd gave him a . . .

Bunch Quitter's Summons

By Giff Cheshire

THE tinker was an insignificant-looking little man, even in the saddle, and that day when he rode the rough trail to Horsefly Springs no one would have guessed that he had an appointment with a man from the mysterious Phantom Gang. It was this lackluster anonymity that made him priceless to Big Sam Alembert, who headed the owlhoot outfit.

The long drought had baked the Three Peaks country to a glaze of empty, sage-dotted terrain and blunt, rocky eminences. Little Cash Cameron did not hurry, but he dreaded what lay ahead of him The pack pony with the two chests containing the tools of his tinker's trade had been left a dozen miles behind, at the little Bar B spread.

There was a stolid look of ineffectualness to him as he rode, with his small head on a long neck sticking out of nar-

row shoulders. His short trunk made his legs look long, but they were not, and they terminated in the big feet of a man half again his heft. He rode in slack-limbed indolence but his eyes were alive and burning.

Bob Forrest had ridden out from the springs, and Cash did not change expression when the man loomed from behind a rock. A tall, good-looking, uneasy-mannered man, Forrest frowned at Cash.

"Howdy, Cash. I been waiting here since daybreak."

Cash nodded. The surrounding rocks gave off a radiant heat of their own under the high-noon sun, but this was not the cause of the perspiration dripping against his sides. "Yeah, I know. But I got held up. You know how I got to move mighty easy, Bob."

"Well, you're here." Forrest placed a half-smoked cigar between his thin lips and dragged on it. "What's the dope on the Flint City bank?"

Cash sighed. "We might as well play our hands, Bob. I don't know. I ain't been there yet. And I ain't going."

The older man was staring. "How come?"

"I'm quitting the bunch, Bob. I've had enough."

A moment's disbelief was in Bob Forrest's deep-set eyes, then anger came in a flood. "That's what *you* think, fella! Big Sam won't let you quit! He'll kill you first!"

"Mebbe." There was calm acceptance in the little tinker's voice. "Or you will. Or Dad Moresby. I've figured on that."

"What's got into you?"

"I just want to quit."

FORREST dragged again on the cigar, then threw the stub away in distaste. The tinker's burning eyes were on him steadily. He was not afraid of Bob Forrest, not yet. Big Sam Alembert could not operate without his innocuous-looking little outside man. Forrest would have to ride back to the outlaw camp and make medicine with Big Sam and Dad Moresby. After that—

Bob Forrest's manner changed. "Look, Cash. You know Big Sam thinks the world and all of you. He's getting old. You'll put him in a fix."

"I thought about that. Tell him I'll never forget him and what all he done for me. And Dad. Only, I'm through."

"I think I'll take you in for a powwow, fella!"

"No." Cash had anticipated that. His six-gun had come into his hand in a movement almost too fast to see. His bulging eyes glinted, and Forest relaxed his own arm with a sigh. He had never seen the tinker riled before. He did not know what to expect. "Ride, Bob. Tell Big Sam I'm sure sorry, but this is the way it's going to be. Tell Dad the same. So long." Cash sat still as a rock while the outlaw turned his horse and rode away.

He sat there until he saw Forrest disappear over the rim, a thousand yards away. A strange feeling held him that was partly relief, partly regret. He had known for a couple of days that it had to be. Yet he was aware that it was not yet done. They would not take this lying down, and he was not in a position simply to run away.

He turned back toward the little Bar B without any uplift in spirits, thinking of the past eight years of his life. Cash had been fourteen that day when a drunken outlaw's blazing gun had cut down his father. It had been on a two-bit cattle spread, hundreds of miles from here. A pair of trail wolves had stopped at the ranch at sundown, a man named Link and Big Sam Alembert, who even then was getting old. Link had demanded fresh horses in exchange for the ruined animals they had ridden in, his eye on a big roan that was Newt Cameron's pride and joy. At Newt's protest, Link had shot him through the heart.

Big Sam Alembert had not liked that. For a moment the horrified, heartsick young Cash had thought there was to be a second gunning. Then the tense moment broke, but Big Sam took Cash with him. It had been an isolated, poverty-ridden spread and his questions revealed that Cash had no relatives. Big Sam parted company with Link then and there.

Big Sam had made as good a father

as any man could under the circumstances, Cash knew now. Later he had joined up with Dad Moresby who, like himself, had taken to the back trails out of circumstances rather than desire. Later they had picked up Bob Forrest, a much younger man, and gradually the Phantom Gang had developed.

As he matured, little Cash Cameron had looked grotesquely out of place with the three big trail wolves. This fact eventually gave Big Sam the idea that was to grow into a smoothly operating system. The three outlaws soon discovered that they could safely send the sober, silent, insignificant-looking kid into any town for supplies. Then it was found that he could safely case a prospective job with little danger of rousing suspicion. Later it developed that he had a genuine talent for studying a bank or picking the site for a stage holdup. As these things became apparent, the outfit's operations took on a marked finesse.

Young Cash had always had a knack for tinkering, and finally Big Sam outfitted him and sent him out to work independently. Cash moved from one frontier town to the next, mending pots, sharpening knives, fixing clocks and water pumps and anything that needed repair. When he had finished both his open and secret work he moved on, but before he reached the next town he always arranged a meeting with Bob Forrest.

NO ONE seemed to have ever noted the fact that a week or so before a bank was hit a nondescript little tramp tinker had been around, even when they wondered at the cunning efficiency of the holdup. Little Cash Cameron just never registered very heavily on people, and this became the Phantom Gang's most valued asset, together with the plans he worked out.

Cash had accepted his role, for Big Sam Alembert stood head and shoulders above the average outlaw. A hard-and-fast rule was that nobody was to be shot in a stickup. Cash always planned the way around that. He rarely contacted the gang, except through Bob Forrest, who in turn never took part in the actual holdup. It was foolproof and highly successful, and Cash knew his pulling out of the gang would finish it.

He could not escape a strong feeling of disloyalty when he considered this and the years in which Big Sam had tried to be a father to him. Except for his trade, Big Sam was as fine a man as ever walked. So was Dad Moresby. Cash had never cottoned to Bob Forrest, but the man had accepted the gang's methods and principles.

Cash did not feel free as he lined out toward the Bar B. A man could not shuck off the emotional accumulations of years with a few words. Like most men living outside the law, neither Big Sam nor Dad had placed any real value on money. They had spent it as they gained it, shuttling back and forth across a wide sweep of territory.

The outlaw trail was blind and dead-end, and a man had to keep going until he dropped or something dropped him. Or unless he simply changed his mind, as Cash had. But Big Sam and Dad were too old to change. They would have to go back to old, more dangerous methods and likely, somewhere, their trails would end in a blaze of guns.

Yet the new thing in Cash Cameron's heart flared to full fire again as he rode into sight of the Bar B, a plain, unpretentious little cow spread down in a saucer. He had stopped there to water his horse on his way to Flint City and the next job, and he had stayed three days, tinkering and thinking.

Eilene Bruce waved to him from the porch as Cash rode into the dusty little yard. She did not know why he had gone to the Horsefly Springs. She did not know that he wanted to stay, unless she had guessed it. She knew nothing about his past. When he told her what was on his mind, she might very well send him packing. Women usually showed small interest in little Cash Cameron. Yet on this basis of imponderables, he had taken this day's step.

"Dinner's waiting," Eilene called.

Cash nodded, smiling at her, and rode on to the barn. The sight of her had

set his heart to hammering, and he knew he had done the only thing he could. He stabled the horse and returned to the house, washing carefully on the back porch, slicking down his thin brown hair. He stepped into the kitchen, and again he saw it as he had seen it that first evening when he came in to put a new valve in the pitcher pump at the inside sink.

He understood it better now. Eilene Bruce was small, but wiry like himself, perhaps not pretty but with all of woman's charm. He had noted the run-down poverty of the spread as he crossed it and rode up to the house. But the kitchen and all the inside of the house, he discovered, was pin neat. Though there was no other man on the place, her father having died the winter before, a natural hospitality had caused Eilene to offer him his supper. He had admired the neat, quick way she had with her work.

He had slept in the barn, and the next morning he had tackled some outside jobs, repairing the windmill, fixing gates and reaches of fence. "I can't pay you," Eilene had said thoughtfully, "in anything but your keep." Cash had said that would be all right. He had thought grimly of his share of the gang's profits, that Big Sam had kept for him. Cash had always lived on his tinker's wages because it was dangerous to have big money on him.

It was needed here. Eilene Bruce was having a struggle. She was fit and quick with woman's work, but had no hand for outside chores. He discovered that she had fifty-odd head of underfed steers. She was going downhill fast, and the thing was that the two of them could make a go of it.

AS HE ATE his noon dinner, Cash did not regret his decision, but he questioned his ability to make it stick. Big Sam Alembert had a touchy pride, and no outlaw liked a bunch quitter. A man had to be on one side or the other. They rarely completely trusted the few who tried to straddle the fence. So there would be a powwow in the hills, and probably a determined effort to change little Cash Cameron's mind.

Cash went down to the barn after dinner and went to work on a broken double tree on the buckboard. A sense of satisfaction always came to him when he worked with his hands.

Long ago he had discovered that men were of two breeds, the hunters and the tillers. Big Sam and Old Dad and the cold-eyed Bob Forrest were of the hunter-kind, restless, seeking, roaming, always in search of the new. Cash Cameron was of the other ilk, a man who wanted to stake out his claim in life and work and improve it and grow old and contented among familiar things. He had been happy with his own stay-put father, and he knew now that he had not been happy since. Until he had found this place. It was what he wanted.

He acknowledged that everything was against his staying here, all the things that lay between him and his old comrades, and the things that stood between himself and Eilene Bruce. An insignificant little man like himself was crazy in the head to be dreaming as he was. Yet a dogged determination held him to his course, aware of the happy way Eilene had relaxed and devoted herself to her housekeeping since he had been on the place.

Cash was pumping water for the cattle that evening, the wind being down, when he saw the rider cut down off the distant rimrock and head toward the ranch house. It was Bob Forrest's gray, and Cash frowned, tension holding him in a fixed stare. He had been aware that Forrest would try to sight his direction, as he left the springs that noon, and get an idea as to his destination. Now Forrest was streaking across the shadow-brushed flat. The barn cut Cash off from view of the house, and he moved out where he could be seen and waited.

Forrest had a grin on his face as he pulled up. He did not dismount and he was wary, keeping an ungloved hand close to the grip of his Colt .45. His first words smashed Cash's hope that he would not discover Eilene and the fact that she lived here alone.

"I run into a cuss back a piece," Forrest said, the grin still a taunting ghost

on his thin lips. "But I already had a idea it was a filly trying to pull you outa the gang."

"What do you want here?" Cash demanded.

Forrest pulled a cigar from his pocket, licked and lighted it in deep thought. "You, Cash. We talked it over. Our camp's right under Three Peaks. You'll see a big break in the rocks. Somebody'll stop you there. You can have time to tell the filly good-by, but be there by noon, tomorrow."

"Or what?"

Forrest rolled the cigar between his lips, removed it. "It was a girl that put the idea in your head. If it hadn't been for her, it'd never happened. If there wasn't any girl, you still wouldn't want to change. Either way, you won't get the girl, Cash. Play it smart."

A sheet of ice had formed on Cash's back. "Big Sam'd never stand for anything like that! Nor Dad!"

The outlaw's grin was frank and taunting, at last. "Mebbe Big Sam and Dad don't have so much to say about things, no more, kid."

Suspicion mixed with the cold light in Cash's eyes. "So you've turned ambitious, have you?"

"Could be, but I ain't bluffing. Be there by noon, Cash." Forrest tensed. "Don't reckon you'll stoop to back-shootin' when I ride off, kid. You always had Big Sam's funny ideas about honor. I'll see you at the camp, in the morning." The outlaw turned off deliberately and rode away in a rising cloud of alkali dust.

Cash thought for a long while, then went up to the house. There were fresh berry pies on the kitchen work table, still steaming and fragrant, and he doubted that Eilene had even known they had had a visitor.

He said, "Well, I'll be going in the morning, Eilene." He noted the quick contraction of her eyes and hurried on. "I want to make it clear. There's things that won't ever let me stay put. I've got snake-tracks on my back trail. I wanted to tell you."

She smiled. "You don't have to let me down easy, Cash. I never figured it mattered so much what a man's been. It's what he wants to be in the future that counts. If you want to keep on that way, there's nobody to stop you. But if you're going, Cash, you better go now. If that's the way it is, it really isn't right us being off out here alone."

"Yeah, I know."

"But after supper, Cash. I thought you'd like those berry pies."

AFTER supper Cash packed the pony and saddled his horse. He hoped that Eilene would not come out to say good-by but she was on the porch as he came past. He stopped and she came toward him. She did not offer her hand, nor speak. Rising slightly she kissed him hard on the mouth, then whirled and ran inside.

Cash headed for Three Peaks that night. The country was open, and by ten o'clock the full moon gave him good light. By midnight he saw the escarpment break ahead. As Bob Forrest had foretold, an armed man stepped out of the shadows and halted him.

"That you, Cameron?"

"Yeah, it's me." He did not know the man, which lent proof to Forrest's claim that he had the say of things now. It proved that Forrest would do what he had threatened, that Cash Cameron had done right in yielding. Bitterness roweling him, he snapped, "Well, where's the camp?"

"Go on up the wash. Wasn't expecting you till morning. You can't miss it."

Cash rode on, the pack pony and two chests of tinker's tools jogging behind him. Five minutes later he saw the light of a small fire. He rode in openly.

Bob Forrest stood closest to Cash, his hand on his gun. Beyond the fire another stranger stood, wary, dangerous.

Cash's stomach tightened. "Where's Big Sam and Dad?" he gasped.

"Long gone, feller. I knew you'd be smart enough to come. Light down, kid. Hungry?"

Cash stayed in the saddle. "You backshot 'em!"

"Could be. They were getting old and careless. This could be a fine setup, with-

out so many damned rules. And with you casing for us, kid."

"You murdered 'em! And I don't owe you a damned thing, except maybe a slug in the guts!"

"You forgetting that girl, Cash? Look! You'll keep your word, same as Big Sam or Dad would. So you're making up your mind right now. Come back with the promise to stick, and your girl's all right. I just want your word, Cash, though damned if I ever seen what honor bought a man. I had to beef the old turkeys, all right. Months ago. We're moving fast from here on. We'll make money. You'll get the same old cut."

"Not by a hell of a lot!" Cash knew that his position was hopeless, before these two deadly gunmen, with a third below at the break. Yet Bob Forrest was completely mistaking what had held him to the owlhoot trails. If his two friends were gone, he wanted no part of this outfit. And with a little luck he might erase the threat to Eilene Bruce forever.

They expected him to make the break now. Relaxing his tone of voice, Cash said, "What happened to the money Big Sam was keeping for me?"

"I've got it. When you give me your word, it's yours."

Assuming an easy manner he did not feel, Cash swung to the ground. Alert eyes watched his every move. Cash knew that he had one advantage. They would not kill him, unless they had to, for a live, sound little tinker on their side and working for them was the sole reason for this play. Cash's mouth twisted in quiet anger. Bob Forrest and his two new cronies wanted to be real curly wolves, but they needed an insignificant little man to provide the brains.

That brain was flashing, faster than it had ever worked before, studying the setup, laying plans. Casually Cash said, "You got any coffee?" and started to unload the pony pack.

"Yeah, we got coffee. And you can use your tools on the pot, Cash. It got a slug through it, somehow, and George here's about used up his shirt tail keeping it plugged with a rag."

Cash took the two tool chests from the pony, standing them on end, side by side. Forrest's remark made a picture in his mind of how it must have been. Big Sam and Dad would have put up a real fight, if they'd had a chance, when the big play came for leadership. He wondered when it had happened but did not ask. It had been nearly a year since he had seen either of the two oldsters, so there was no way of knowing how long he had been working for this coyote trio.

"Who're the new men?" Cash asked.

"This is George Becket. Man down at the break's Stan Golden." Forrest had poured coffee into a tin cup, and now he handed it to Cash. A tinge of hope had crept into his voice; he figured he still had a chance of winning the tinker over.

CASH took the cup in his left hand. The coffee was scalding hot, and he blew on it. Then he threw it full in Bob Forrest's face, moving along three lines at once, his hand streaking for his gun or the surer-fingered initiative, himself darting for the two tool chests exactly placed where he wanted them. The gun spat flame a split-second ahead of George Becket's. He was belted half around, but he saw Becket go down as he cut behind the chests.

Mouthing a stream of foul cursing, Forrest hurled himself out of the firelight, shooting once in savage fury, again with calmer aim. A slug plowed through the thin wood of a tool chest, but Cash had not lingered there. They had been placed to cover a quick crawl to three piled rocks that had looked like the best fort. Cash made it, his left side seeming paralyzed. They couldn't figure the moves like Cash Cameron. That was why they had tried to hold him.

Now a stillness was in the canyon, with Forrest in cover beyond the fire. At the break, a quarter mile down, Stan Golden would hear the shots and come in. Cash had taken that into consideration. Now he waited, not expecting to live long, wanting only to take two more men with him.

Forrest must have guessed where he had forted up, but was wary about testing the spot. The silence held, except for

a cricket that racketed somewhere up the canyon. Minutes passed, with Cash's left hip beginning to pain him. Exploring fingers came away dripping blood.

Then Golden's voice lifted puzzedly, a short distance below. "Bob? George?" Forrest was too wary to answer, and there was a long silence again.

A stone rolling down a slope indicated that Golden was moving in. Not knowing the positioning, he would be unable to tell friend from foe and would be paralyzed until he had found out. Cash knew that his only chance lay in another fast maneuver. He started crawling, knowing Forrest would be confused as to who was making the sound, moving toward the left slope of the draw, along which he suspected Golden was coming.

It worked for the moment, with neither of his enemies certain enough to fire. Then Golden's uneasy voice called, "Bob?" Fixing the position, Cash rose and fired. Standing, he could see Golden, forty feet ahead of him, crouching in the rocks. In a spasmodic reaction, Golden fired twice. Cash fired again, and the man went backward with flailing arms.

Forrest had opened up now, rising out of the rocks, knowing that the chips were down. A bullet whined off a rock close beside Cash, but he forced himself to coolness. He could see Forrest, and he made his next shot good.

It was well past dawn when Cash left the outlaw camp. He had bandaged the torn gash on his hip. He had taken a short-handled shovel from one of the tool chests and buried the three men. Bob Forrest had been lying about still having Cash's share of the past years' profits. None of them had much, showing it had gone the way of every trail wolf's trove. But what there was would have been useful to the little Bar B. Cash thought a long while before he dropped the belts into the one big grave and covered it all with dirt and rubble.

Dawn was breaking over the eastern hills before he finished this chore, and in it was something clean and hopeful. Thinking of the blood trail that might have started from this lonely spot under Three Peaks, Cash wondered if his night's work might not have partly expiated his own past. Whichever, it was definitely in the past.

Yet he lashed the tinker's tools onto the pack pony. They were the tools of an honest trade, however humble. And a man with his own little piece of graze ran into many a little job of patching.

Sixes

Exciting Novelette

CHAPTER I

THE single street of Goldledge lay quiet under the noonday sun, like an animal that has been dealt its death wound. The ring of the pickax, the muffled report of giant powder blasting rock in a mine tunnel, all the incessant clamor of human gophers burrowing for gold in the surrounding hills had stilled at last.

Jared Pace, pick and shovel on shoulder, six-gun on hip, walked slowly down the street from his claim on the outskirts. A six-footer, fit for any of the hard jobs in a hard land. A mustanger turned miner when Goldledge was booming. His brown, clean-shaven face was glum as he surveyed the empty street. He'd been shaving every morning for a week, since Linda Fargo didn't favor beards and there was plenty of time now to strop a razor and heat a little water. Plenty of time for everything he'd neglected while working his claim. No need now to dig from early morning until late evening. The stratum of rock layers beneath the surface pay dirt showed not a speck of color.

Every claim in Goldledge had petered the same way. A week ago the last of the miners had packed out—the last but one. Jared had lingered on to dig, hoping against hope. This morning he knew it was useless to hope. He must go back to the wild uplands to hunt mustangs.

Stake a Fool's-Gold Strike

By J. Edward Leithead

After the Goldledge lode petered out, Jared Pace figured on pulling up stakes from the doomed town. But when a nester avalanche turned up .45 pay dirt, that Colt metal forced Pace to risk his luck against landhog claim-jumpers.

Door hinges creaked, sounding shrill in the silence. Doc Shindler had come out of the stable office, puffing on a cob pipe. Doc was long and lean and baldheaded, a veterinarian who had drifted to the gold camp to locate a claim and ended by running a livery stable. He and Jared had formed a partnership. Pace had driven a bunch of gentled "wild ones" to Goldledge. Instead of selling the mustangs, he had turned them over to Doc for hire while he dug gold.

"You goin' to eat?" said Shindler, as Pace drew near. He fell into step at the other's nod, grumbling, "All we do is eat and sleep."

"I'm pullin' out," said Pace. "What'll you do, Doc?"

"Go with you, I reckon." Shindler peered ahead under his wide hatbrim. "I see the rest of the camp diehards headin' for the restaurant. Linda don't have to ring the dinner bell to let 'em know it's feedin' time. Makes me sick to look at that handful and think of the mob that used to bolt for Linda's in boom times."

Jared didn't say anything. The men filing into the Nugget Restaurant nodded as Pace and Shindler came up. McGinn, the saloonman, and his two bartenders; Cobb, the storekeeper, and his clerk; Purdy, the blacksmith, and his helper. The tradespeople found it not so easy to uproot themselves as the footloose miners. Pace and Shindler were

last to enter, hanging hats and gunbelts on wall pegs before seating themselves at the long table in the center of the room.

WAITRESSES appeared with pad and pencil. A feminine voice broke the dismal quiet from the head of the table, "The camp's washed up, boys, but no use letting it spoil your appetites. Only I'd like to know how long you're going to hang around, so I can figure when to move out. You'd probably starve to death if I closed up before the last man's left."

Some of the gloom was wiped from their faces as they looked at the proprietress of the Nugget. Linda Fargo was a slender, blonde girl with an enchanting smile. She had come up the hard way, helping her widowed mother cook for railroad grading gangs until the old lady died. They had saved some money, enabling Linda to open an eating house in Goldledge when pay dirt was first discovered in the hills.

"By ranny," said Doc Shindler, "Linda shames us all! She can still smile, though she stands to lose as much as anybody by the camp goin' bust. Stayin' here to give us three squares a day when she ought to be headin' for some live town."

"Wish you'd tell us what town, Doc," Cobb, the storekeeper, turned on him. "And how I'll move my goods there. I just stocked up a little while before the bubble burst."

"Me, too," said McGinn, the saloonman.

"If you can find a wagon or two around the camp, Doc and me have plenty of horses to do the haulin'," Jared spoke up. He caught Linda's eye. "Yeh, I'm through with that pick and shovel in the corner. I'll be hittin' for the uplands. But I'd like to see you located first."

Linda's smile fled, she came around the table to stand by his chair. "Too bad about your claim." Her voice dropped lower. "I'll miss all the boys, but you the most, Jared."

"Been pretty good friends, ain't we, Linda?" His pulse was racing, yet he couldn't ask her to marry him and share the roving life of a wild horse hunter. "If I know where you are, I'll drop around often enough so you won't forget me."

"Not a chance of that, Jared." She was smiling again. "What'll you have to eat?"

The meal was half over when wagons were heard rumbling along the camp street. Pace got up and went to the door. He was inclined to rub his eyes, to be sure of the reality of those travel-stained wagons crawling toward him, the lean horses looking ready to drop. He stuck his head back in the restaurant:

"Wagon outfit comin'!"

Doc Shindler and the rest piled out of the door to stand and stare. A big, rawboned man in flop-brimmed hat and overalls drove the lead wagon. On the seat with him was a sunbonneted woman holding a baby. 'Teen-age youngsters had lifted the side of the wagon sheet to peer out. The driver yelled, "Whoa!" and set a cowhide-booted foot on the brake. His voice rose again:

"Howdy, folks. They told us this camp was deserted."

"Who told you?" asked Jared.

"Minin' fellers we met several days ago. Said the mines had closed down, but there was plenty of good farmland hereabouts. That's what we're lookin' for, and there's more of us on the way."

"Nobody to stop you from settlin', that's sure," said Pace. "Public domain in Buckhorn Basin, and not a single cow outfit around."

The farmer's eyes grew hard. "That'll suit us, by mighty! Most of the cow fellers don't think the plowmen got any right to a spot of dirt. Glad to find a few friendly faces here. What's the reason you ain't pulled out?"

Jared Pace told him that they were the tradespeople of the camp, undecided where to go. An idea came to Jared as he talked.

"If a lot of you farmers are aimin' to drive stakes out yonder," he said, "you'll need some kind of a supply center. Why not Goldledge? We have a store, a restaurant, a blacksmith shop, a saloon and a livery stable."

The farmer slapped his leg. His wife beamed and rocked the baby, which had started to cry. "Friend," boomed the sodbuster, "you've got everything we need, and we're not quite broke. All of us want grub, the menfolks want a drink, some wagons and farmin' tools need fixin', and maybe we could swap a few horses wore out by the trip. My name's Sube Folsom. What's yours?"

GOLDLEDGE celebrated that night. The advent of the farmers had saved it from gradually falling into decay, joining the ranks of ghost towns that had once been riotous gold or silver camps. Jared Pace didn't return to the uplands and mustanging. He and Doc Shindler were in the horse business in earnest, for more sodbusters arrived before the month was out. The partners had plenty to do, buying and selling and doctoring sick animals.

Most of the farmers had brought barbed wire, with which they fenced quarter-sections. They plowed and planted, visiting Goldledge weekends and often in between. Yet, as many as had settled in Buckhorn Basin already, there was room for many more farms. Grass enough to support thousands of cattle remained untouched by the plowshare. That any cowman had his eye on it was the last thing that entered the minds of the basin dwellers.

One day Shindler and Pace worked late over a horse with the glanders. It was long after dark when Doc told Jared to go and get his supper, that he'd be along later. That was Doc, always ready to skip meals or sit up all night with a suffering horse. Linda Fargo served meals until nine o'clock, but the restaurant was empty when Jared went in, taking one of the smaller tables along the wall.

Linda herself relayed his order to the kitchen. Coming back, she said, "Jared, did you hear a sound like firing over west, a little before sundown. It didn't last long."

He gave her a quick look. "No. Doc and I were busy in the stable. It could've been some of the farmers blastin' out stumps. I know they bought giant powder at Cobb's store."

"I guess that was it," said Linda. "Isn't Doc coming to supper?"

"Got a pretty sick horse on his hands," replied Jared. "If you'll fix him up a tray—"

He faced the front window, cocking an ear. "Somebody ridin' this way fast. Kinda late for the farm boys to head in."

The girl, too, caught the faint drumming, which swiftly grew louder. The riders hit Goldledge on the west side. Jared and Linda glimpsed five-gallon hats as they slowed their pace going by the Nugget. One pulled up, waving the others on.

"Cowhands!" exclaimed Jared. "What they doin' in Buckhorn Basin?"

"Those reports I heard—" began Linda, doubt returning.

The restaurant door was yanked open and a dusty figure jingled in. He was a tall and wiry young man in buzzard-wing chaps, revealing a head of curly light hair as he tossed his hat on a wall peg. His face, darkly tanned, was arrogant in expression. He kicked out a chair and sat drumming impatiently on the table. Linda said to Jared:

"I'll see what he wants."

A waitress brought Pace's supper just then. He started eating, keeping an eye on the newcomer and Linda. He heard the young fellow say:

"I like grub before I do my drinkin', so I let the hands go on to the saloon without me. Lance Hawthorne's my name. Old man will be in later."

"Your father?" said Linda, eyeing him steadily.

"Who else?" retorted Lance. "Old Pike Hawthorne, of the Slash H brand. What's on the bill of fare, sister?" He picked up the menu, gazing at her over the top of the card. "Say, what's a good-looker like you workin' in such a prairie-dog village for? You'll be seein' a lot of me."

Spots of angry color tinged Linda's cheeks. She said, "I'm Miss Fargo. I own this place. Why will I be seeing a lot of you?"

He grinned broadly. "Because Slash

H is takin' over Buckhorn Basin. Sit down and I'll tell you about it."

"I can hear you just as well standing." His speech, thought Linda, had ominous implications.

Lance Hawthorne frowned. He half-rose, grabbing her by the wrist. "I ask you to set and talk, and you act uppity! Sit down!"

Linda, accustomed to the rough men of grading gang and gold camp, swung her free hand against Lance's face. He captured that hand, too, coming to his feet as he realized her supple strength. That blow in the face had stung him. She kicked his shins when he strove to force her down in the chair.

Neither was aware of the brisk tapping of Jared's boot heels until he swung around behind Lance, encircled his neck with a long arm, dug a knee in Lance's back. Linda lurched against the table as Hawthorne let go of her and tugged at the arm clamped about his throat. He couldn't loosen its viselike grip, couldn't get his breath.

"You'll apologize to Miss Fargo!" Pace snarled in his ear.

Hawthorne's half-strangled answer seemed to indicate assent. Pace released him and he stood a moment, stroking his throat. Then, suddenly, he darted toward the wooden counter near the door, on which stood the cash register and cigar showcase. He flicked out his gun as he dodged for cover. A bullet grazed Jared's neck.

CHAPTER II

IF PACE hadn't moved as Hawthorne thumbed hammer that slug would have cut him down. He dropped to the floor next instant. Linda cried out, thinking he'd been hit. "Get away!" Jared hollered at her, and jerked the table on its side, bottles of condiments sliding off with a clatter.

Linda retreated out of range. Jared's Colt banged, the bullet ripping Lance's shirt sleeve, revealed at the side of the counter. Hawthorne quickly drew his arm in, threw another shot at the man peering over the table edge, driving splinters into his face. Jared could see Lance through the glass showcase. It would have been possible to slap a bullet between the leering eyes, but he didn't want to kill Hawthorne if he could avoid it. Pace figured he was just the swell-headed son of a big rancher, who was in the habit of riding roughshod over people and fancied himself gunbad.

Lance cracked away, careful not to expose his arm again. In shifting about, as bullets penetrated the table top, Jared set his knee on a bottle of ketchup. He dropped his gun, grasped the bottle. As Hawthorne stuck his head above the showcase to trigger, Pace's arm shot forward. The bottle struck Lance on the head, breaking into fragments and spattering him with sauce. He staggered. Jared was on his feet in a flash, jumping for the counter.

The street resounded to the thud of booted feet as Jared tackled the half-stunned Lance, snatching away his pistol. Linda sped toward the door, turned the key in the lock just as Hawthorne's companions reached it, yelling and brandishing guns. They could see Jared wrestling with Lance and shouted to the girl to open up. But she faced them defiantly until Pace dragged the groggy Hawthorne to the door.

"Tell 'em if they bust in you'll get your ticket!" Pace snapped, as a cowhand raised his six-shooter to smash the glass.

Lance glared at Jared, but stopped the cowboy outside with a gesture. At that moment another bunch of horsemen swept into the lighted area before the restaurant. One of those who tumbled out of leather was a big, white-bearded man with saddle-bowed legs. He strode toward the door, pushing aside the stockhands who greeted him with their version of Lance's trouble. Inside the restaurant, Jared and Linda were unexpectedly reinforced by Doc Shindler, who approached from the rear, cradling a Winchester in his left arm.

"What's to pay?" demanded the veterinarian. "Seein' that gang out front, I came through the kitchen."

"Stand by, Doc," said Jared. "We may need you.

"That your father?" he asked Lance.

"Yeah," growled Lance, "and he'll take you apart!"

Pike Hawthorne bellowed, "Let me in!" and rattled the doorknob. Jared nodded to Linda, "Just the oldster, nobody else." She unlocked the door, allowing the big cattleman to squeeze in, shutting it in the faces of the others who crowded up.

"What you done to my boy?" roared Pike. "Half-killed him?"

Lance looked gory enough, but most of the red stuff smeared over his face and shirt was ketchup. He began to yammer, but Jared cut him short, briefly explained what had happened. Pike barely listened, fuming to himself, hard eyes piercing Jared.

"It's a dang good thing for you, young feller, you didn't slam lead into Lance. I don't take kindly to your bustin' him with a bottle, either. He's a little high-lifed, but he don't mean no harm. Fix him up if there's a sawbones in this frazzled town."

Jared eyes glinted. "Not hard to see where Lance gets his manners. Maybe he'll keep his hands off ladies after this." He glanced at the gaunt veterinary. "Here's Doc Shindler to tie up his head. Guess the glass cut it a bit."

LINDA brought water and clean rags from the kitchen. Doc had a roll of adhesive tape in his pocket. Both knew that Jared was wise in staving off trouble with that big outfit hanging around the door. He wanted Lance patched up to get the Slash H men out of town as soon as possible. Doc set to work on Hawthorne's son, none too gently.

Lance winced, snarling, "Hey, not so rough! You must be a horse doctor!"

"That's what I am," retorted Doc. "And I'd a heap rather doctor a horse. Hold still."

When Shindler had finished, he said, "That'll be five bucks."

Lance sneered, "Send me a bill, you old walloper!"

Doc reached for his Winchester, said, "Five bucks—now!"

Young Hawthorne shelled out, then looked at Linda, "I've lost my appetite, but I still think you're pretty as a new-painted red wagon."

His eyes shifted to Jared, hardening, "Settle with you later."

"Anytime," said Jared, and turned to the elder Hawthorne. "Your son said somethin' about takin' over Buckhorn Basin. That mean you're throwin' a herd on the grass that ain't plowed up?"

Craggy-faced Pike gave him a grim stare. "It means we're takin' the whole basin and fencin' it, after we drive out them scarecrow sodbusters. Got rid of some of 'em this afternoon. Crackin' down on the rest tomorrow."

"You can't do that!" barked Pace.

"Who'll stop us?" roared Hawthorne. "Not the law, not the handful of men left in this busted gold camp. The land's open to anybody who can take and hold it. That's us, the Slash H outfit. C'mon, Lance."

Father and son stepped out into the waiting mob of cowpunchers, caught up their horses and made tracks for McGinn's saloon. Jared, Linda and Doc gazed at one another in stunned silence. They knew the law wasn't likely to interfere in behalf of their friends, the sodbusters, who had helped to keep Goldledge alive.

"That *was* shooting I heard then, around sundown," said Linda. "I wonder if any of the farmers were killed."

"It would be murder if they were," said Jared. "None of 'em carry guns. But that wouldn't move the sheriff. Cattlemen elected him and he's sure to stand with 'em. I don't know what we can do to help the farmers, but I'll rig a bronc and ride over west to see how much damage has been done already."

"Maybe Goldledge won't fare no better than the plowmen," remarked Doc. "I don't figure them Slash H men like us any too well."

IF THEY had but known it, Lance Hawthorne at that moment was urging his father not to deal in Goldledge

when the Slash H had brought in all its cattle. Lance had been humiliated and was eager for revenge. If Goldledge was boycotted and that girl lost her restaurant business, she'd wished she hadn't treated him like a snake. He didn't know what business Pace was in, but he meant to even that score with hot lead sometime.

Old Pike didn't need much persuading. Anyone who handled Lance rough earned the old man's hatred. There was another town, Jericho, that could supply the wants of the outfit. Though it was a good many miles from the basin, Pike promised his son they would put Goldledge out of business by a slow throttling process.

The Slash H bunch had some drinks and rode out of town before Jared saddled a horse. He hit the trail west of Goldledge, but hadn't covered more than a mile when he met three covered wagons strung out along the road. Sube Folsom drove one of them. He told a tale that made Pace's hackles rise.

Without warning, the cow outfit had struck late in the afternoon, cutting Folsom's fence and the fences of his neighbors, turning loose a horde of cattle on their hundred and sixties. There'd been some powder burning to hurry the farmers into loading their families and household goods into wagons and getting out, but nobody shot so far as Folsom knew.

"We had no chance against men bristlin' with guns," said Folsom in a rage-shaken voice. "There was a young squirt, son of this Hawthorne, I believe, who kept ridin' up and down, twirlin' a six-shooter and cussin' us out for bein' slow. I hit him with a clod of dirt and he come near to shootin' me."

"I know the young sidewinder," said Jared. "Had a run-in with him at Linda's eatin' house. Buckhorn Basin's goin' to see tough times, Folsom, but the townfolks are standin' by you farmers." He turned his horse about. "I'll ride back with you. We're goin' to call a meetin' and see where we stand."

Folsom repeated his story at the meeting of the Goldledge tradesmen, held in Linda's restaurant. But nobody had any suggestions for preventing the Slash H landgrab. McGinn and his bartenders, and Purdy, the blacksmith, were about the only men besides Pace and Shindler who could handle guns. Linda Fargo said she wasn't such a bad shot herself and Jared believed her. But six men and a girl couldn't shoot it out with the big Slash H gang. The farmers were in a fighting mood, but even if there had been shooting-irons for them, it was improbable they could stand up to gunfighters.

The situation looked hopeless, but next morning Pace rode out into the basin, accompanied by Doc and Linda. They wanted to lend what aid they could to the farmers who, according to Pike Hawthorne, were due to be moved that day. There was a haziness in some sections of the basin which indicated the invaders had burned the shacks of Folsom and his two neighbors ousted the night previous.

From a hilltop, the trio saw longhorn cattle scattered over the three adjoining farms. Every bit of barbed wire fence had been torn down. Only a few riders were visible, so the biggest part of the outfit must have departed early to drive more sodbusters from their holdings.

JARED and Doc were in a cold rage, Linda between anger and tears, as they turned their mounts north around the hill. In that direction the basin was most thickly populated. Jared and the girl were wearing six-shooters. Doc had his Winchester under the right saddle-fender. A mile farther on they encountered barbed wire and cedar posts flat on the ground, horse tracks pointing across the tilled land. The raiders had dropped the fence and gone in after the sodbuster.

Buckhorn River cut the southeast corner of the quarter-section, flowing between high banks. Shouting and whip-cracking down in the stream bed made Pace and his friends swing spurred heels. From the edge of the bank they saw a covered wagon bogged in the spongy ground at the south side. Range

riders were lashing the team, which evidently had crossed the shallow stream, then stuck as they tried to haul out on the south shore. The wagon wheels had sunk to the hubs.

"Lookit them polecats beatin' that team!" exploded Doc Shindler, always aroused by cruelty to any animal.

Grim-faced, Jared shoved his horse over the embankment, the girl and the veterinary following swiftly. The voice of the farmer reached them as they splashed across the stream:

"My team can't make it, I tell you! If some of you fellers would tie onto the wheels, or let me unload—"

"We've got other things to do," broke in a sombreroed rider harshly. "Want you to clear off this land pronto. Your horses will pull out if enough leather's poured into 'em. You ain't helpin' none. Use that whip or I'll throw down on you!"

He caught the sound of splashing and hipped in the saddle. His eyes protruded a little as he discovered Pace and his friends within six-shooter range. The tough cowhand yelped, "Hey, boys, we got company!"

Immediately four other Slash H men kicked their horses around to the rear of the wagon. The Hawthornes were not with this bunch of hardcases.

"What they figure they're goin' to do, Cutshaw?" sneered a cowboy.

Cutshaw was the fellow who had threatened to toss a gun on the farmer. "They'd better figure on turnin' tail before we fist steel and scorch 'em up some," growled Cutshaw.

"Like this?" said Jared, slinging out his gun while Cutshaw's slying hand was an inch from his holster. "We'll do the scorchin', spikeheel, if you don't hitch ropes to them hind wheels and start pullin'."

Doc pushed his bronc up beside Jared, leveling Winchester at the scowling gang. "Beatin' them horses!" he fumed. "It's sickenin' what some humans will do to other humans, and they treat animals even worse. I'm warnin' you, my trigger-finger's mighty trembly!"

Hard-bitten Cutshaw and his mates couldn't disregard the threat of six-shooter and saddle-gun. Two began untying their ropes, stepping down in the mud to tie onto the rear wheels.

CHAPTER III

THE farmer, one Harker, leaned out of the wagon to shout a greeting to his rescuers. His little brood of children crowded against the endgate, gravely eyeing the two men and the girl sitting saddles in the shallow river. Linda called cheerfully to the youngsters and shy grins appeared on faces still smeary from breakfast, probably interrupted by the Slash H invaders.

The two cowhands remounted, yelled to Harker to start his team as they plied their broncs with steel. The ropes tautened and the wheels rose from the mire with a sucking sound. With four horses exerting a steady pull, the wagon began to move, slowly at first, gaining speed as the front wheels took hold on firm ground.

"Keep goin' to the top of the bank!" shouted Pace, riding through the mud at one side of the vehicle. Hoofs slapped along behind him as Linda and Doc trailed after, keeping an eye on Cutshaw and the other two whose ropes weren't engaged.

The wagon lurched over the south bank and stopped. The sullen-eyed cowhands slid from saddles to unhitch their lariats. They cursed the mud that clung to the whale-lines, coiled and rehung them in the tie-straps. By that time, Linda, Doc and the three Slash H men had scrambled up the bank. Cutshaw burst out:

"You're pilin' up trouble for yourself with Slash H, Pace."

Jared snapped, "You fellows ought to be shot for what you're doing to these farmers! If we had enough fightin' men you wouldn't get away with it."

"Nester-lover, eh?" sneered Cutshaw. "Why does a man like you want to take up for a lot of grass-spoilers? You'll hang and rattle with 'em till you die of lead poison."

"I'm for the underdog, that's why," retorted Jared. He turned to the farmer.

staring open-mouthed with the lines slack in work-worn hands. "Goin' to Goldledge, Harker?"

"Yep, no place else to go."

"We'll see you safe on your way and come back," said Pace.

Harker clucked to his team. Pace and his friends fell in behind the wagon. Looking over his shoulder, Jared saw the Slash H men drop out of sight over the embankment. He shoved gun in holster, Linda imitating him. Doc thrust the rifle under his saddle-fender, saying:

"Sorry they didn't prod me to use it. No real guts in the gang."

The wagon and its escort hadn't gone far when a rattle of gunfire broke out at the river. Slugs, narrowly missing the three riders, ripped slivers from the endgate. The Harker kids, clustered at the rear of the wagon, scuttled to the shelter of the household goods piled high in the wagonbed. Linda turned a pale face toward Jared, who was wheeling his horse, jerking out his Colt.

"Cowardly dogs!" she exclaimed. "They might've hit the children!"

"Don't call 'em dogs, not that vermin!" remonstrated Doc, hauling out his Winchester as he faced the river with Pace.

The Slash H men were crouched under the lip of the embankment. Smoke blossomed again and bullets snarled by the horsebackers. Next moment, Jared was raking his mount into a gallop. After him streamed Doc and Linda. Jared lifted his gun as he rode pell-mell.

Fire lashed out, but the first shot didn't count. He whipped another at a wide-hatted head he recognized as Cutshaw's. The tough cowhand reared up at the edge of the bank, tossing his arms wildly. He plunged backward down the slope.

Doc's rifle whanged and a sombrero slid from sight, a hole in the crown where its wearer's head had fitted snugly. Linda's gun joined in. She wasn't accustomed to shooting from horseback. The bullet raised a spout of dust a little short of the river bank. But the Slash H men, with two down, and finding those fast-moving targets hard to hit, pulled away from the embankment. They were back in the saddle, their horses kicking up spray in midstream, when Pace and his friends came in sight of the river.

Jared lowered his Colt, spoke to Shindler as the latter flipped the lever of his Winchester, "Let 'em ride, Doc. Two dead ones are enough, seein' that they didn't hurt us any."

"I could make it three less we'll have to fight if they come to Goldledge after us," said Doc sourly, watching the trio spur out of the river and hightail over the far bank.

BUT the Slash H didn't come to Goldledge, seeking the killers of Cutshaw and his mate. They were too busy driving out the sodbusters. Pike Hawthorne probably figured on losing a few men while pursuing his lawless course. Dispossessed farmers kept streaming into town. Pace and Shindler went out again to give a hand to any who needed it. But Linda stayed in Goldledge to help care for the refugee women and children.

When they had chased the last sodbuster from his holdings, the Hawthorne outfit set to work to fence Buckhorn Basin. They had brought a wagonload of wire on spools, and also utilized the wire and posts removed from the quarter-sections.

In Goldledge, supplies were running low, for the homeless farmers and their families were hearty eaters. A few had left the basin, but the majority remained, hoping that something would happen to the conquering cattlemen so they could retrieve their farms. It would be too late to reap a harvest that year, with winter not far off, but they could look forward to the spring planting. Pace and the other townsmen encouraged them to stick it out. If the farmers went, that would be the end of Goldledge, since it was plain the Slash H outfit wasn't going to patronize the place. Not that Jared and his friends wanted them as customers.

Before the food situation became critical, the town dwellers looked for the arrival of Hack Loftus, a freighter who had served them when Goldledge was a

mining camp. Jared Pace was the only one who suspected that the Hawthornes intended encircling Goldledge with barbed wire and posting "No Thoroughfare" notices on their range boundaries. In that way, the stockmen could starve them out.

One day Jared rode to the north side of the basin, where Loftus always entered with his freight wagon. The Slash H fence had not been completed at that point, but a crew was working on it, bossed by Lance Hawthorne. Hidden in a brushy coulee, Jared witnessed things to prove the invaders meant to turn Goldledge into a ghost town and graze cattle where it had once flourished.

Loftus, the freighter, drove up with his ten-mule jerkline and was halted by gunhung Slash H fence builders. Young Hawthorne and the burly freighter argued so loudly that Pace, although some distance from them, heard every word.

"What d'you mean I can't go through here?" demanded Loftus. His helper, on top of the load, slid holster around to the front of his belt, in easier reach.

"Pike Hawthorne has fenced the basin to run cattle," replied Lance. "I'm Pike's son. That prairie-dog village, Goldledge, went bust as a minin' camp, but sodbusters came in to keep it goin' till we arrived. We chased 'em and they took refuge in Goldledge. The old man and me have a special grudge against the people runnin' Goldledge. Want to be rid of them and the farmers. Easiest way to do it is to prevent 'em gettin' any supplies. We've put up 'No Thoroughfare' signs around the basin and have men ridin' the boundary, in day and night shifts, to stop any fence cuttin'!"

"But you're interferin' with my business, too," stormed Loftus. "If Goldledge is still on the map, I've got goods to deliver. There's a plenty big openin' for me to drive in here and I'd like to see a high-chinned whelp like you stop me!"

"Go ahead if you feel chancy," Lance retorted. "I have plenty gun-hands to back me up. First we'll kill your mules, then if you're still of a mind to head on through, we'll drop you and that tough guy on the wagon."

JARED PACE knew there was no use in showing himself, to side Loftus in a running battle. They could never outride the Slash H guns. He feared for a moment that Loftus and his helper would throw away their lives in a vain attempt to cross the boundary. But the freighter, though a fighter, was no fool. The odds were heavily against him. He cursed Lance, swung the jerkline around and hit the backtrail.

Hawthorne turned to his men with a crooked grin. "That fixed him. Maybe that girl and her scrappy boy friend at Goldledge will wish they hadn't been so tough with me when they find out we're starvin' 'em out."

"You sure hold a grudge, don't you, Lance?" remarked a cowhand, then added hastily. "It's all right with me, you understand. I get good wages for smokin' up folks the Hawthornes want cleaned out."

"You all get paid better than most outfits," said Lance sharply. "Let's finish another quarter mile of fence, then call it a day. Tomorrow we ought to finish the job."

Jared lay low in the coulee, keeping his horse from making any sound to betray his presence. As soon as it was dark, he was riding after Loftus. The freighter would not go far before camping for the night. Pace, observing that the fence builders had brought a chuck wagon so they needn't return to headquarters for meals, had a half-formed plan for getting supplies to Goldledge.

Impatiently, Jared awaited the coming of night. While the Slash H crew was eating at the wagon, he stole from the coulee, mouting after he had crossed the unfenced part of the boundary line. He found Loftus camped two miles north. The freighter quickly agreed to Jared's plan, said he'd hitch up and drive back slowly, to give Pace plenty of time to carry out his end of the program.

When Pace slipped by the Slash H wagon a second time, someone was

twanging a banjo and lusty voices were raised in song. He gave his horse the spur once he was beyond earshot. Picking up Doc Shindler as he passed the livery stable in Goldledge, Jared hurried on to Linda's restaurant. The three went into a huddle. Jared told how the Slash H had prevented supplies from coming in and his plan for outwitting their enemies.

"If it wasn't for the patrol riders Lance spoke of," said Pace, "we might cut the fence at some point away from Lance's camp and let Loftus through with his wagon. But it'll be less risky to smuggle the stuff in right under his nose. That is, Linda, if you don't mind stringin' that sidewinder along. I hate to ask you, and I wouldn't if we weren't up against a grub shortage. Should Lance act up, I won't be far off."

"I can handle him," said Linda firmly. "I'll get into my riding togs."

The sodbusters asked questions but got no answers as Jared, Linda and Doc whipped out of town. When they neared the fence builders' camp, the men were still singing to the accompaniment of the banjo. Jared left his friends in the coulee while he scouted the boundary. Out in the darkness, Loftus was waiting with his big freighter. Jared went back to the coulee.

"All set for you to do your stuff," he said to Linda, and watched the girl ride out toward the campfire, a short distance from the Slash H chuck wagon.

In five minutes, Jared and Doc followed on foot, going toward the wagon. The singing and banjo-strumming had ceased abruptly. Linda, at that moment, was stepping down from her horse at the invitation of Lance.

"How come you're ridin' out alone?" asked Hawthorne, as much surprised by her smile as the fact she'd ridden into camp. "Or is Pace with you?"

"Don't see him, do you?" returned Linda. "I heard the singing. It sounded as if you were having a good time."

Lance grinned. "Join us! Maybe you've changed your mind about me bein' somethin' that oughta be tramped on."

Linda found it difficult to make a pretense of friendliness, knowing what Lance and his father were up to. "You'll have to admit you were pretty rough that first night I saw you, Lance." She looked at the hard-faced banjoist. "Do you know *Salty Buckaroo?* That's a good lively tune."

CHAPTER IV

MOTT GROVER, the Slash H cook, had been trying to sleep, but couldn't on account of the singing. Rising from his blankets near the wagon, he peered over at the fire as Linda Fargo rode in. While he stood staring, he felt the cold ring of a Colt muzzle against his neck.

"Take it easy, cookie!" muttered Jared. "Want to borrow your wagon."

With his right foot, Pace located Grover's gunbelt on top of the blankets and kicked it aside. The cook turned his head, swearing under his breath. Doc loomed up in the darkness, leading Grover's wagon team. Just then the group at the fire burst into song, drowning out the sounds Doc made in harnessing the horses. Pace whispered instructions to Grover.

"And if you don't give the right answer," Jared threatened, "I'll empty this gun into you. Ready, Doc? Climb in, cookie."

Grover stepped up on the front wheel with Jared right behind him. Doc swung up on the other side, turned the team eastward, keeping out of the light of the fire. Lance Hawthorne's shout reached them:

"Where you goin', Grover?"

The cook, prodded by Jared's gun, hollered, "Down the line to get some sleep!"

Lance chuckled and went on singing. None of the campfire crowd paid any attention to the wagon as it rumbled away, halting at a certain spot on the unfenced boundary. There Loftus' freighter was backed up, ready for unloading. While Jared held a gun on the cursing Grover, Doc and the two freighters hurriedly transferred goods to the chuck wagon. It hadn't the capacity of

a freight-wagon by any means, but they loaded on enough to keep Goldledge from being starved out for some time to come.

The big freighter rolled north and the heavy-laden chuck wagon pulled away in the opposite direction. There was a lull in the campfire singing as the wagon passed the coulee. The trampling of a ten-mule jerkline would have been quickly investigated, but the sound of two horses merely brought forth the remark that Mott Grover was having a time picking a spot where he wouldn't be disturbed.

Jared quit the wagon at the coulee. Doc had handed the reins to Grover, to sit with a Colt pouched in the wrathful cook's side while he drove. Gathering up the two saddlers left in the coulee, Pace waited for Linda to leave the Slash H fire. When, finally she came riding southward, Jared saw the girl wasn't alone. Probably Lance had insisted on riding back with her to Goldledge. This was something Jared hadn't counted on. The wagon had a good start, but Lance was almost certain to discover it on the trail ahead and become suspicious of Grover's rambling.

Pace hoped it wouldn't happen too near the fence-builder's camp. He ran the chance of being overheard himself as he held to a short interval, ready to spur forward at the first sign of Hawthorne going on the prod. As the miles reeled off, it began to look as if the wagon would reach Goldledge undetected by old Pike's son. Then, suddenly, the voices of Lance and the girl rose to an excited pitch. Jared kicked his horse to a gallop, casting loose Doc's mount as a six-shooter blazed at him. But he held his fire, for Hawthorne and the girl were close together in the trail.

"He grabbed my gun, Jared!" shrilled Linda. "Watch out!"

"I knew it was your boy friend!" snarled Lance. "You two been workin' some trick on me. Grover would never drive to Goldledge if he wasn't forced. Come on, Pace, I'm waitin' to drill you to doll rags!"

He fired again. Jared answered, throwing down on Lance's horse, a target he couldn't miss in the dark. Horse and rider went down in a kicking tangle. But as Jared rode within fifteen paces, Lance's gun streaked flame. He had worked free of the dying horse, come to his feet. His bullet clipped Pace's left ear. The latter, crouching in the saddle, tripped his hammer. Lance swayed and fell.

"I guess you killed him," Linda's voice came out of the darkness.

But Jared, hitting the ground, reported several minutes later, "No such luck. Creased him like I would a mustang, though I didn't aim to. He'll be out for a while and have to walk to camp. Doc would cuss me for shootin' that horse, but I was afraid of hittin' you with Lance up in the saddle."

Jared and Linda hit it up for Goldledge, taking Shindler's mount. The wagon had got there ahead of them and was being unloaded by the jubilant townsmen and farmers. Mott Grover shook his first at Pace before pulling out with the empty chuck wagon, roaring:

"You think you're pretty smart, but I'll play even for this!"

"I'm sure you'll try," grinned Jared. "On your way back, you might look around for Lance and give him a lift. He likely hates footwork, not bein' used to it."

LANCE and the outfit cook did not show up in Goldledge immediately to get revenge. No doubt old Pike rode them with spurs for letting those supplies reach the town, though he knew it only meant temporary relief for townsmen and farmers. Jared knew it, too, and that he couldn't work the same trick twice. Unless the Slash H outfit was broken up or driven from the basin, Goldledge would have to be abandoned.

It was during a visit to the shack on his worked-out claim that Pace hit upon a scheme. All the gold he had dug, enough to outfit him for horse-hunting, he had left in a buckskin pouch under the flooring. Prying up the boards to be sure it was safe, Jared poured some of the dust into his palm and pondered. If

Goldledge became a ghost town, it was all he had to start anew or nearly all. Then it occurred to him how that sack of gold might save Goldledge and the farmers.

McGinn, the saloonkeeper, owned a shotgun. Jared borrowed it and loaded the gun with a golden charge. Sparingly he blasted it into the worthless gravel of his claim and one or two others, retaining some of the dust as a sample. He told Doc and Linda and the rest of the townfolk about the salting scheme, but kept it from the farmers, who were too likely to talk at the wrong time.

"How," asked Doc, "are you goin' to spread news of this fake strike?"

"Ain't goin' to spread it," said Jared. "I'll let the Slash H do that. I've been expectin' Lance and Grover to visit town any day, with maybe an army of punchers, to settle for that trick played on 'em. If they don't come soon, I'll think of another way to let 'em know."

But the next day Lance came, galloping into Goldledge with a half dozen cowhands, all looking mean. Grover, the cook, wasn't in the party. Scattering the hated sodbusters with their flying horses, they flung off at McGinn's saloon and breasted the bar. Jared Pace was outside the door as Lance, tossing off a drink, said to McGinn:

"We've come huntin' the snakeheads who put it over on us the other night. Won't do Pace and Shindler no good to hide. Linda Fargo was in it, too, but I can hurt her most by layin' out her boy friend with a lead chunk. Know where we'll find—"

"There's Pace now," the saloonkeeper pointed to the door.

HAWTHORNE and his men jerked about as Jared walked into the saloon. Lance's hand rested on Colt-butts, but Jared didn't reach.

"I aim to wipe out our score, Pace!" gritted Hawthorne.

"Sure you've got enough help?" retorted Jared. He stepped up to the bar. McGinn, who was relieving his bartender, shoved out bottle and glass. Pace hesitatingly drew forth his buckskin pouch. "Guess I'll have to pay you in gold, Mac."

McGinn, taking his cue, showed surprise. "I didn't know there was an ounce of dust left in Goldledge. You ain't struck it again?"

Jared said, "Let's not talk now. I want a drink."

A gun rammed Pace in the ribs and Hawthorne rasped, "Tell the man! You opened a new vein or somethin'?"

Jared snapped, "You'll have a hot time findin' out!"

Lance crackled, "Untie that pouch!" With seeming reluctance, Jared obeyed. Lance's eyes glittered at what he saw. "You'll show us where that came from, Pace, or I'll sieve you right here!"

He snatched the pouch and lifted Jared's gun, then strode beside him to the door, and down the street, the Slash H hands trailing behind, keeping an eye out for interference. But Doc Shindler and the other townsment had been instructed to stay under cover. The sodbusters on the street stared helplessly as the Slash H men marched by with Pace.

He showed them his salted claim. The cowhands, wandering onto the adjoining claims, discovered the rest of the gravel that Jared had shotgunned into a semblance of pay dirt. They were wildly excited. Lance ordered his men to get the horses and bring one for Pace.

"You're goin' to ranch headquarters with me," Lance told Jared. "I aimed to get Shindler, too, but I can't bother lookin' for him today. My old man will want to know about this new strike. Figurin' to dig yourself a fortune on the quiet, eh? You won't live to get rich!"

Jared said nothing. He hadn't expected to be taken prisoner. Evidently Doc wasn't at the stable when the Slash H hands took Jared's horse. They returned quickly with the animal. Pace looked in vain for Shindler as he rode away with the Hawthorne crew.

But they didn't go all the way to Slash H headquarters, encountering old Pike and some of the hands at the chuck wagon on the range. The cattlemen listened to his son's report with bulging eyes. The men standing around began

to talk of throwing up their jobs and staking claims.

"Now wait a minute!" Pike roared. "Maybe there's a lot of gold, maybe only a little surface stuff. I'm no miner, I'm a cowman. If there's a stampede back to Goldledge—and there will be when this gets out—we'll have a big market for Slash H beef. Miners got to eat. Every man here will be sure of a good job. That's better than gamblin' on a gold deposit."

His argument seemed to go over with them for they quit clamoring.

"What'd you bring Pace for, Lance?" old Pike glowered at the gunless rider. "Thought you was goin' to lead his lights."

"Hadn't time," said Lance. "Brought him along to do it later."

"I want you to ride to Jericho instanter," said his father, "and spread it on thick that pay dirt has been rediscovered in Goldledge. Show 'em that sample. We'll tie up Pace till you git back."

AS LANCE raced away eastward, Mott Grover, the cook, who had been eyeing Jared balefully, shuffled up to the big boss. "I'll have a meal ready for you in a few shakes, Pike, if you'll let me have this smart guy to rustle wood and water. I owe him somethin', same as Lance."

Old Pike grinned like a wolf. "Okay, Mott. But if he's balky, don't treat him so rough he won't be in shape for Lance to finish off."

The cook pulled his gun. "Climb down!" he barked at Jared, and the latter slid from the saddle. "Stir yourself, now, and fetch me some brushwood from over yonder. You'll be in easy shootin' range from the wagon. I'll sure cripple you if you try to run."

Jared had no intention of running without a horse under him. He strode to the brush-fringed river bank, gathered an armload of firewood. He had a small rock concealed in one hand as he trudged back to the waiting cook. It pleased him to observe that his horse still stood near the wagon. Pike and his cowhands were squatting in a circle, talking over the "gold discovery."

"Drop it there," Grover snapped at Pace, "and grab them buckets!"

The tough cook's gaze was averted for a split-second as Pace dumped the wood on the ground. Jared whirled, crashing the rock down on Grover's head. As the cook's knees bent, Jared snatched Grover's gun and leaped around the wagon toward his horse.

Pike and his hands, hearing Grover fall, had straightened up. As Pike reached, Jared threw a leg across leather, his Colt drumming as a cowhand pitched out a .45. The fellow sat down suddenly, bored through the thigh.

Pace turned his bronc and hit southward, glancing back over his shoulder. The men who had been to town with Lance were after him all too quickly, for they hadn't unsaddled. Jared threw one with a well-aimed bullet when they crowded him. The rest waited for the boss to come up.

For an hour, Pace dodged them in the roughs of the basin, steering clear of Goldledge so they wouldn't corner him and draw his friends into the fight. As his horse tired, he took shelter under the high river bank, squeezing the animal's nostrils while baffled riders pounded by above him. Old Pike was growling:

"Lance can go after that slippery cuss when he gets back, but we ain't wastin' no more time. Got to make some openin's in the fence besides the big gate, to let the stampeders through."

Evidently the "No thoroughfare" signs weren't to apply to gold-seekers. Jared knew why. Miners were not interested in the land like cowmen and sodbusters. The more that came in, the more beef Pike expected to sell. As soon as the Slash H men were out of sight, Pace started for Goldledge, well satisfied at the way his scheme was working out.

He saw nothing of Lance during the next few days, possibly because stampeders flooded Buckhorn Basin, making tracks for Goldledge. The weather had turned cold, the sun was more often

behind clouds than shedding its enfeebled rays on a region crawling with treasure hunters. Early snowfall wasn't unusual. When the ground froze up little mining could be done. But the stampeders kept on coming.

The salted claims had fooled the Slash H men, but it didn't take the veteran miners among the newcomers long to discover the truth. It was spitting snow on the morning that a party of old-timers, led by one Dex Quillen, a full-bearded, pineknot of a man who had followed most of the big gold rushes, paraded up the single street and turned in at McGinn's saloon. Jared and Doc, noting the angry faces as they passed the livery stable, followed quickly. The awaited bombshell was about to burst in Goldledge.

CHAPTER V

PACE and the veterinary, mackinaw-clad, with gunbelts strapped outside their coats, had nearly reached the saloon when Doc said, "Look who's comin' downstreet!"

Jared saw the two horsemen riding through the snow flurry, heads bent to the biting wind. The Hawthornes, father and son. "I can guess what brought 'em," Jared said grimly. "They don't know what they're headin' into."

He and Doc stepped into the warm barroom. Gathered around Dex Quillen's little party of miners was a blank-faced crowd, stricken speechless by the words pouring from Quillen's lips:

"I tell you we've been flimflammed, boys, dragged here at the start of winter weather by a fake strike. There's just three claims that show a sign of color, all of 'em salted with a shotgun. Not a real chunk of pay dirt anywhere. Question is, who set the stampede in motion and expected to benefit by it?"

"The people who run Goldledge mebbe," someone said in a rage-choked voice. "If they did, we'll hang the last one of 'em!"

Jared nudged Doc. The Hawthornes were dismounting outside. A blast of wintry air entered with the cowmen, Lance throwing his weight against the door to close it. Old Pike, unfastening his sheeplined coat, grinned at the crowd that had turned to face them, suddenly silent.

"Well, winter's struck, gents," boomed the Slash H boss. "I expect you're a little low on supplies. But you won't have to worry none. Plenty of cattle on my range to carry you through the blizzards. Lance and me dropped in to see how many head you'll need to feed this boom camp—"

He was interrupted by a little storekeeper from Jericho, who had left his wife to handle his business, while he joined the rush, "Say, it was Lance Hawthorne fetched the news to our town! He had some dust to prove how rich the strike was."

Dex Quillen's whiskers seemed to bristle. "Then, by the great horn spoon, it must've been the Hawthornes who salted them claims! Whether we discovered it or not, they figured on us havin' to hole up here till spring and sellin' beef to the camp!"

Old Pike and his son blinked. "You say," blurted the elder Hawthorne, "that some claims were salted—there wasn't a new strike?"

Lance caught sight of Jared and Doc. He leveled an arm, shouting, "There's the fellow that done it—Jared Pace! Him and Shindler have been feudin' with our outfit. I got that gold dust from Pace."

"Yeh, took it from me at gun's point!" barked Jared. "McGinn, the saloonman, was a witness to that. The gold was some I dug before this camp went bust."

McGinn swung to the top of his bar. "It happened right here in my saloon, boys. Lance got the drop when Jared wasn't lookin'. Nobody told Lance there'd been a new strike. Could be he used that gold of Jared's to salt them claims."

A bedlam of yells shook the barroom. The Hawthornes backed against the wall, throwing hands to six-guns. Before they could draw, the furious miners swarmed over them. Jared and Doc had leaped clear of the charging mob. They never expected Pike and his son to rise from

the floor, but the miners dragged them, battered and bloody, to their feet. Quillen glanced at the saloon rafters and pointed, bellowing:

"There's a handy gallows! Get the ropes off these cow-fellers' saddles!"

JARED'S scheme had worked with a vengeance. The Hawthornes were ruthless, deserved no mercy, yet somehow he couldn't let them die by hanging without putting up an argument. He jerked away from Doc's clutching fingers, rammed his way to the center of the mob and grabbed Quillen's arm.

"Give them a chance to clear out of the basin, Dex! That's good enough. They've harmed the sodbusters more than you miners."

Gasping for breath, blood trickling down their faces, Pike and his son stared at Pace. They knew he had tricked them, that the miners had been brought in to force out the Slash H, save the farmers and Goldledge from extinction. Now Jared was talking to save the Hawthornes' lives.

Dex Quillen looked at Pace in surprise. "I'd think you'd want 'em hung as bad as the rest of us!"

But Jared shook his head and turned to the cowmen. "Promise to pull stakes and never come back, if the miners let you go?"

Old Pike would have promised anything at that moment. "We'll leave as soon as we can round up the stock."

"Well," said Quillen, "I'll see what the rest have to say. Personally, I've always been for stringin' up claim-salters and claim-jumpers."

Heated arguments followed. If Linda Fargo hadn't dropped in, bundled in a fur coat, Jared might not have won his point. Though she disliked the Hawthornes, especially Lance, the girl was against hanging them. Her irresistible smile had as much to do with the final release of old Pike and Lance as Jared's persuasive tongue. Yet the Hawthornes didn't look grateful as they stumbled out to their horses and disappeared in the storm.

Pace expected the miners to leave before supplies reached the vanishing point. That first snowfall hadn't amounted to much. A week passed in which the stampeders and the Slash H outfit could have drifted back where they came from. But the disappointed miners hung around, exploring the ground in the hope of striking pay dirt. And Pike Hawthorne broke his promise. He had no intention of moving from the basin.

It was Jared who discovered the outfit hadn't gone. Riding the range, he found Slash H cattle grazing as usual. All that morning the sky had been leaden. He returned to Goldledge with the snow coming down in a feathery mass, driven by a shrieking wind. It was a blizzard this time. In less than twenty-four hours, Buckhorn Basin was snowbound. The worst of it was that there was little to eat in Goldledge.

Jared had told of finding the cowmen still in possession. He and Linda were criticized by everyone but Doc. They realized themselves that it had been a mistake to persuade the miners to turn loose those lobo ranchers. For several days Goldledge was close to starvation.

As the storm abated, a cattle-hunting party broke through the drifts, rounding up a small herd and drove it to town. Pike Hawthorne raged when he learned of his loss. He couldn't collect a cent for those cattle, knew better than to attack Goldledge. He wouldn't be fighting a handful of townsmen and a bunch of farmers unused to warfare, but a mob of well-armed miners, who outnumbered his cowhands.

A second blizzard struck the basin. Afterward the Goldledge miners raided the Slash H herds again. Old Pike saw that this would keep up all winter, that before milder weather set in, half of his cattle would be gone. Besides the stock driven off by the miners, a lot of his longhorns had frozen to death. Pike told his son:

"Between the weather and them Goldledge raiders, we're in a tight. Got to round up and pull out before another storm."

Lance knew he was right. He hated to leave without pitching lead into Jared

Pace, but it didn't look as if they would meet again.

ON A CLEAR, cold day the Slash H outfit started to withdraw from the basin. A score of riders topped a snowy ridge as the head of the column reached the main gate in the fence. Pace and Shindler were with the meat-hunters. Scouring the range for cattle to replenish the dwindling beef supply at Goldledge, they had found the deep-worn tracks of the departing herd. It was a pleasant surprise to Jared and Doc that the Hawthornes were clearing out. They would have let the cattlemen go in peace, but for the need of gathering a last bunch of stock to carry Goldledge through the final winter months.

Drawing his gun, Dex Quillen sent his mount floundering down the slope. The other miners shoved their horses after him. Jared and Doc came last. From the first, although hunger had prompted it, neither had felt just right about taking another man's cattle. But the Hawthornes had brought it on themselves.

Guns smoked as the meat-getters jumped the drag. A cowhand spilled loosely to the snow. The party swept on up the right flank of the herd, their horses breaking through the crusted snow at every leap. Swing riders wheeled to meet them. The bark of six-shooters echoed flatly in the snow-filled basin. Cow horses with empty saddles turned back to buck the drifts.

Jared and Doc were keeping an eye on the four wagons trailing along on the right flank. They expected trouble from that quarter. As the miners hit the disordered rear of the column, driving a hundred or more cattle toward the left, six-guns spoke over the endgates of the wagons. Jared's Colt and Doc's Winchester flamed answer.

The head of Grover, the vindictive cook, was raised above the tailboard of the nearest wagon. His first shot had come close to unhorsing Pace. Pulling up his snorting bronc, Jard's pistol-laden hand chopped down. Grover had lifted himself higher in the wagon, to make sure his second slug didn't miss. Jared's bullet struck him as his thumb hit the hammer-prong. Grover lurched and dropped from sight in the wagonbed.

Doc had ridden on to pour Winchester lead at the man in the second wagon. A high-pitched yell attested to the veterinary's deadly aim. But his horse went down as bullets hailed from the next vehicle up the line. Doc was scrambling out of a snowbank, pawing around for his rifle, when Jared slogged along, his horse kicking up clods of snow. He saw a teamster leaning over the endgate of the third wagon, trying to slam lead into Shindler.

Jared's Colt bucked in his hand. The teamster slid down behind the endgate. The three teams began dragging driverless wagons at crazy angles through the snow.

Jared's eyes switched uptrail as the driver of the fourth wagon gave up triggering and scrambled back to his seat. From the head of the cattle column seven or eight horsemen were slogging toward Pace and Shindler. Jared reloaded fast, for Lance Hawthorne rode slightly in the lead, an unholy joy lighting up his arrogant face. He threw a shot at Jared, but it snarled wide. Doc had recovered his rifle, was slapping the barrel to dislodge the snow that choked it.

"I was wishin' mighty hard we'd meet before I left, Pace!" shouted Lance. "It's you or me this time!"

Their upraised pistols spat flame. Lance reeled in the saddle, a blank look coming into his face. He saw Jared still seated firmly on his fretting bronc. Lance's Colt barked again, but the bullet skimmed the snow. The world he was leaving whirled before his dimming eyes. He rolled limply out of the saddle as his father, with a frenzied bellow, set his gun fogging. The whiplike crack of a Winchester cut in and the cattleman toppled from his horse.

JARED had been drawing bead when Doc took the play away from him. He shifted aim to the cowhands fanning out to surround the pair who had brought the high-riding Hawthornes low. Doc pumped his Winchester, kneeling in the

snow. Before the hard-shooting Slash H riders could encircle them, Dex Quillen and half of the miners returned to the fray with spitting guns. The cowhands quit cold. Of what use to fight on, outnumbered with the boss and his son down.

Jared reined nearer the fallen Hawthornes. Lance lay rigid in death, but old Pike showed signs of life. As Pace stepped down from the saddle, the cattleman's fingers closed on the gun he had dropped. Jared put a booted foot on the moving arm, bent and tossed Pike's gun into a snowdrift.

"I don't want to kill a wounded man," Pace said, gazing into craggy features distorted with pain and hatred. "You've lost your son and half your outfit. And all for lettin' greed drive you. But I expect you'll never change." He turned toward the one wagon still in the vicinity, called to the teamster, "Drive over here."

As he helped the driver lift Pike into the wagon, the oldster spoke Lance's name. They laid the limp form beside the beaten cowman, and the teamster climbed to his seat. Jared said to the cowhands sitting quietly under the guns of the miners:

"Keep right on movin' out of the basin!"

Wagon and horsemen headed for the scattering trail herd. Jared strode back to Doc, who was removing the gear from his dead bronc. Doc's face was screwed up as he patted the animal's neck.

"He carried me many a mile, Jared. I hoped he'd live to a ripe old age.. But how many horses do? I'll miss this feller."

"Sorry about him, Doc. You'll have to ride behind me."

The hundred-odd beef cattle streamed, lowing, into Goldledge as the winter night closed in. Jared spied Linda, wrapped in her fur coat, standing outside the restaurant as the herd went by. He slipped from the saddle, saying to Doc, "See you at the stable."

Linda opened the restaurant door as Jared crossed the icy sidewalk. They entered together. It was cheerful with light and warmth inside. The cooking odors from the kitchen were tantalizing to a hungry man.

"You must be nearly frozen," said Linda, removing her coat. "I'll get you some hot coffee. I see we're going to have fresh beef for a while longer."

"It'll be the last," replied Jared. "The Slash H has gone. Doc and I met the Hawthornes. They both left in a wagon."

"Dead?" Linda's eyes widened.

"Lance was, but the old man will probably live. The farmers can reclaim the basin after the snow melts and use that mess of barbed wire to fence their quarter-sections. We'll make a real town out of Goldledge yet."

"And someday we'll need a mayor," said Linda, with her bewitching smile. "I can tell you his name."

Jared's arms went around her and drew her close. "Guess I know the fellow. You may be right and you may be wrong. Bein' chief magistrate of a town is shootin' pretty high for a mustanger and miner. But right or not, I want you for my wife, Linda, honey."

Chuting Pardners

By Joe Archibald

Those bedspring ranchers, Gabby and Butterball, woke to a muzzle-rimmed nightmare when they hit the town of Bedrock Springs. For before they could hit the featherbed trail again, the pair of pokes had to outwit that wide-awake town's hardest workin' coyotes.

AN INDUSTRIOUS ant put down the little piece of stick it was carrying toward a miniature box canyon when it saw the two riders slumped forward in their saddles, sleepily regarding a sign nailed to a tree.

"Bedrock Springs," the fat cowpoke drawled with great effort. "Six miles."

"Too tired to ride that far, Butterball," the skinny man with the big nose sighed. "We been in the saddle all of two hours already."

"Let's make camp, Gabby," the roly-poly ranny said.

The ant scurried through a jungle of matted grass and came out into a little clearing where a grasshopper dozed. "Hey, Hoppy," the ant said, "I come to apologize. You ain't the laziest critter in the world. I just saw two can beat you."

"Well, thanks, Nippy," the grasshopper yawned. "Now go away. You bother me."

Oblivious to the contempt of the insect world, Gabby Snead and Butterball Epps slid out of their saddles and stretched muscles they hadn't used for weeks. They wore the garb of cowpunchers and had at times worked at their trade, but the memory was painful.

Gabby watched his bronc nibble at wild

lettuce that flourished near the edge of a string of pine. He shook his head lugubriously. "Nature wasn't perfect, Butterball. It gives the animals their chuck whenever they need it, without cookin' it. Man has to boil or fry or stew his fodder. After he eats, he has to wash skillets an' iron kettles an' dishes, if he's that high-toned. See if we got bacon, huh?"

"I looked this mornin'. It's your turn," the fat man said. "Say, look!" He stabbed a pudgy finger toward the west. "It's an old barn. Bet there's hay in it. We sleep de luxe tonight."

"Looks danged snug," Gabby grinned, and stuffed an old disreputable pipe with scrap and set it going.

They got into the saddle again, rode over to the old barn, and looked in through a yawning aperture where a window had been. "No hay, but the floor is covered with old straw, Gabby," Butterball said. "Even the broncs'll find shelter here."

A FEW minutes later, they were reveling in comfort and congratulating each other on their ability to prosper by their wits instead of by the sweat of their brows.

"I was thinkin' of that sheriff who drove us outa that town yesterday, Gabby," Butterball said. "The one that was goin' to lock us up fer fragrancy or some such crime. 'Vamoose, pronto,' he says. 'A rollin' stone never rounds up no moss!' You heard what I told him. 'No dog that digs in one place all the time will ever find a bone. He has to move around!'"

"Uh-huh," Gabby sighed. "Ever see a cobbler with soles on his shoes? Or a wheelwright with all the spokes in his wagon wheels? Gent that invented work never done any, I bet. Shut up, I want to sleep!"

Butterball awoke a few minutes after he'd dozed off. He smelled something and not bacon frying. He saw fire that was not in a stove. It was licking at his boots.

"Gabby!" he screeched, and jumped to his feet without first getting to his knees. "Fir-r-re!"

"Not yet, Butterball," Gabby said dreamily. "Let the Apaches git where we kin see the whites of their eyes. They won't never burn no more wagon tr—huh? Wha-a-a?"

"Grab your boots, you skinny jughead! The barn is burnin' down! Git the broncs!" Butterball yelped and ran around in a tight circle, trying to beat out the flames with a blanket.

Both men and beasts managed to escape cremation. Gabby Snead's pants were on fire in the worse possible place. He ran to a partly dried-up creek and landed sitting down. Butterball peeled what was left of the sole of his right boot and smelled hair burning, then dove into the creek with Gabby and ducked his head.

They crawled out and looked up at an irate native. He was a sawed-off banty, but the shotgun he held made him look like a giant. "Got you two firebugs!" he said. "You shoot an' I'll move your brains out!"

"We never set no fire, you li'l rip!" Gabby gasped out. "Not when we was sleepin' right in it. We'll take you to court for ownin 'a fire trap!"

"Don't own it," the whiskered man snapped. "Belongs to Euclid Billdilly. Been lookin' after his property. Awright, git on your broncs! Takin' you to Bedrock Springs."

THEY got their first look at the town less than an hour later and exchanged wondering glances. Looming up in the mist was a high rounded hill. Frame dwellings clung to its sides. The gap along the top was apparently the main street. "Looks like your head the time the barber put the clippers right through it, Butterball," Gabby gulped. "It's a human anthill."

"And just as industrious," their captor nodded. "Got no use fer drones here. Grasshoppers like you two git short thrift. Amen. Well, start climbin'!"

Both themselves and their broncs gasping for air, Butterball and Gabby finally came to the lofty main street and looked into the grim eyes of the Bedrock Springs lockup. "Get in there, pronto! You wake up the sheriff an' it'll be even worst for you."

They stumbled through the cubbyhole of an office and groped through a gloomy,

yawning aperture. The door slammed behind them. A key made an eerie grinding and squeaking sound as it turned in a lock.

"Welcome to Bedrock Springs," Gabby Snead choked out. "How many years'll we git at hard labor?"

The fat cowpuncher clamped his hands over his ears. "Don't say that ag'in, nope! Maybe it won't be that bad. They might decide to hang us."

"Yep, I was lookin' on the worst side, li'l friend," Gabby allowed.

They passed a restless night. A coyote and a screech-owl serenaded them until dawn, then the lawman of Bedrock Springs arrived. His gimlet eyes did not belong in his face and his little head must have been attached to his barrel-like torso through an error on the part of Ma Nature's assembly line. He had to duck low to get in through the door.

"We want a fair trial!" Butterball demanded. "I heard about the constitution an'—"

"I didn't come here to escort you jaspers to no Odd Fellers' picnic," the lawman said. "Hurry up! The judge is waitin'!"

"Huh, it's only six o'clock," Gabby sniffed.

"Folks ain't allowed to sleep in this town after four in the mornin', you shif'less mud-turtles. Foller me."

"We couldn't of got in trouble in a worst place," Butterball moaned, and trudged out of durance vile. They crossed the high-crowned street and the population hissed at them. The courthouse was halfway down the hill on a side street and it was on the bias.

"No chance, not with a crooked courtroom, Gabby," Butterball said.

The courthouse was already full. A round-shouldered citizen with an egg-shaped head sat on the bench. He wore store clothes and a diamond stickpin in his necktie, sported a mustache and pointed goatee. "Prisoners to the bar!" he yelped.

"Well, now, that's mighty neighborly," Gabby grinned at Butterball. "I could drink a—"

"Shut up, you jughead. That hombre means—hey, I don't see no jury!"

"Had one once. You ever heard of a hung jury? Yep, that's what happened," the sheriff said. "Here's the guilty ones, Judge Billdilly!"

"Nobody's guilty unlest they are proved innercent!" Gabby protested. "I demand a just and legal trial an'—!"

"Shut up!" Judge Billdilly nasaled. "Sit down! What's your names? Guilty or not guilty? Pete Humus to the stand."

The little banty that had brought the cowpunchers into town shuffled up.

"You was a witness, Pete," Billdilly boomed out. "You saw 'em burn down my barn out in Nightcrawler Creek. An' whatever else you say won't be used ag'in you. Court is in session. We find the defendants guilty as charged. Fine is four hun'red dollars which is what that barn was worth. Dig down, you law-breakers!"

"They don't waste time here, do they?" Gabby gulped. "Four hun'red dollars? We got just a hun'red an' fifty between us, Judge. Our entire worldly goods. Have mercy—"

"Get up the hun'red an' fifty an' you go an' confiscate their broncs, Pete! Court dismissed. You two crowbaits be outa Bedrock Springs by Satidy night. Next term of court of Syntax County sits when two other owlhoots break the statures of the commonwealth. Where's my chawin' tobacker?"

THE two cowpokes, bewildered and broke, found themselves outside the courtroom. They were free to go, but on foot. "An' me with a bootsole all gone, Gabby," Butterball sighed convulsively. "We come to a awful kettle of sunfish. Well, let's walk up to the main street an' see if we can't find work."

"It can stay hid fer all of me," Gabby yelped. "I never saw nothin' so bad happen to us so quick."

Trudging along the pate of the town of Bedrock Springs, Butterball suddenly stopped and yanked at Gabby's sleeve. "Look, a light in the worldliness!"

Gabby Snead took a gander at the window of a store labeled, *Ajax Groceries & Provisions. Filbert Felch, Prop.* He saw a big jar filled with beans in the window.

Leaning against it was a placard that said:

$250.00 Cash! Give Away! Guess the Number of Beans in This Jar! Contest closes Satidy nite, Sept. 10th! Everybody Legible for Enterin'!

"We can't lose no time!" Gabby yipped. "Let's buy some beans!"

"Howdy, gents!" a voice said, "Yep, I'll even sell you the beans to count. I bet I've already sold a hun'red dollars worth, so how kin I lose on this advertisin' stunt, huh? I'm Filbert Felch."

It occurred to Butterball that the citizen should not be bragging about his identity. He was crosseyed behind his spectacle lenses, and his hair grew straight up. He had a little reddish nose and no chin. "Er, how many beans kin I git for this gold watch?" Butterball asked.

"Two pounds, but I'm gittin' stuck," Felch said. "Come on in."

There were six hangers-on in the Bedrock Springs grocery. "Haw!" one burst out. "Tell these banties about that can of fish eggs that drummer sold you, Filbert. Who'd you think was goin' to buy that Roosian cavvyair?"

"Look, you flea bag with Levis on," Felch flared. "Ain't you sick of ribbin' me? It's been six months now an'—!"

"Bought a can of buckshot swimmin' in ink!" another taxpayer said. "Seed some of it once in Cheyenne. Ha, you could sell hummin' birds' cowlicks in Bedrock Springs just as quick. Filbert paid a dollar fer one can! Show it to the strangers, Filbert!"

Felch snatched up a shotgun. "Git outa here, you laughin' jassacks, 'fore I corn you with rock salt! 'Tain't funny no more!"

GABBY SNEAD stared at the big jar of beans in the window, his eyes half-closed and calculating. Butterball, after the town jokers had departed, exchanged his watch for a sack of little white beans.

The cowpokes were making their exit when Euclid Billdilly pranced in. "So you figger on makin' a try for that prize money, huh?"

He grinned at Felch. "They don't know what they're up against, do they, Filbert?"

"Sh!" the grocer warned, and kicked testily at a sack of onions. "You want to spoil my business? You want more beans to count?"

"Me?" Euclid sniffed. "I got the answer two days ago, Filbert. Give me a plug of Red Anvil chewin'." He poked Butterball in the stomach. "Bet you them broncs of yourn back I win that money, Fatty."

"What do I put up, huh?"

"Three months work at my Pothook spread, both of you jaspers, that's what!"

"It's a bet!" Butterball said without consulting his brain first.

"*Adios,*" Euclid said, and went out.

"Of all the suckers!" the grocer snorted. "Why do you think his name is Euclid?"

"His pa an' ma hated him," Gabby sniffed. "Why else?"

"Guess you don't know no education," Felch said. "I might as well warn you. I wouldn't want to think of my brother-in-law workin' fer Billdilly. Euclid was the first world's champeen mathermectrician an' the judge was named after him. Billdily could change a ten dollar bill when he was three. He can tell you how many quarts of kerosene in a barrel by just measurin' it across the top an' down the side. When he was eight years old he was assistant cashier in the Bedrock Bank. Now he owns it."

"Awright, big mouth," Gabby said to Butterball Epps. "You sold us both into slavery. And Lincoln was shot years ago. I wish you'd never been born!"

"Huh? I couldn't count to ten when I was ten years old," the fat man sniffed. "I can sure as aitch count now. Bring them beans along an' foller me."

The impoverished pair trod heavily along Bedrock Springs' main street, dipped down into a side street that would tax the agility of a goat, and finally found a small shack that was empty. They evicted a large rodent, slapped at some spiders, then sat down to compare what few ideas they had.

"I was thinkin'," Gabby said. "An' never mind no belittled remarks, you tub

of suet. That glass jar is what a certain brand of coffee comes in. I bet I kin find one in the Bedrock Springs dump. All we have to do is fill one with these li'l beans, then spill em out an' count 'em. We got three days."

"Looks to me," Butterball said, "like it could end in a tie all around, or that somebody wouldn't lose by more'n five or six beans. But let's go an' find one of them jars. We got to try an' worm outa this awful pass we come to."

The indolent duo walked to the foot of the hill and circled the human hive until they came to the town dump. They excavated the pile of old boxes, bottles and cans. When it seemed that their search would be fruitless, Gabby dug up a glass jar that was a ringer for the one in the grocery store window.

"Luck is with us, Butterball," he panted.

"I wish it had four legs an' wore a bridle," the fat man sighed. "Now we got to climb home ag'in."

REACHING their temporary domicile, they took off their boots and rested their sore extremities. "I figger hell is a place without horses," Gabby wailed. "Well, we better start countin' the beans, huh? Is this bein' smart?"

"Excuse me," Butterball said sourly. "I couldn't laff right now if I met a catfish wearin' a derby You know that li'l banty who nabbed us reminds me of that cheffie we had on the Bradded T outfit. I'll never forget Ptomaine Tansy. Everybody got his goat easy an' bragged about it. Then one day they all et a stew an' congratulated him fer his culinary talent. Ptomaine said, 'Don't mention it. You fellers really got my goat this time. Let me show you the hide.' An' they all got sick."

"Shut up. Let's count beans," Gabby growled.

Butterball filled the jar with the little white beans and leveled them off neatly at the top. Then he dumped them into an old pail. Gabby picked up a handful and began to count. "Three-six-nine-twelve-eighteen—nope, fifteen—eighteen-twenty-two—"

"Looks like they been gittin' Filbert Felch's goat, too," Butterball said, reclining on an old bunk. "I just wondered, Gabby—"

"Look, how can I consecrate, you bloated bullpout!" Gabby griped. "Let's see, where was I? Twenty-seven-thirty—thirty-three—"

Butterball dozed off. When he awoke, Gabby was intoning, "A hundert an' eighty-seven. A hundert an' ninety—"

"Why don't you mark 'em with a pencil, Gabby? You will git all mixed up an'—"

"A hundert an' ninety-seven. Nope, I'm off somewheres as—Butterball, you've done it. Now I got to start all over. You git outa here or I'll bust the glass jar over your head! With our future at stake, hard labor facin' us in the eye, you—"

"I'll come back and help later," Butterball Epps said. "I'll see if I kin borrer a Chinese laundry countin' board."

Butterball climbed to the main street, paused awhile to get his wind back, and sauntered down the street. Passing an open window he heard, "One thousan' an nine—one thousan' an ten—"

"Awful lot of competition," Butterball sighed. "Seems t' me if Filbert—"

"Afternoon, Filbert," a voice clouded with adenoids said. Butterball looked up and saw that he was in front of the Ajax grocery again, and that Euclid Billdilly was passing by. Euclid followed up his greeting with "Bought any cavvyair lately?"

Felch picked up a head of cabbage and slammed it down again. Butterball said, "They sure got minds that runs on tracks that haven't no switches, li'l friend. Don't let 'em git your goat, unless you have one to cram down their throats."

"Huh? That figgerhead better not count his goats, I mean chickens, 'fore he sets out his eggs," Filbert Felch snapped. Maybe I ain't no mental prodigal but what brains I got I don't waste, by Judas!"

"I never did see a can of that cavvyair," Butterball said. "Like to see what it looks like sometimes."

"Same size as a can of shrimps," Flech said. "It is only eggs laid by fish called

surgeons, that cavvyair. But I don't want to talk no more about it! Leastwise to strangers."

"I was only bein' social," Butterball snapped. "How do you git rainwater up here. Don't it all run off?"

BUTTERBALL loafed in front of the Angel's Rest hotel for another half hour, then went back to see how Gabby was progressing. The skinny cowpuncher looked dead beat. He droned on like a delirious sheepherder. "Nine hun'red an eighty-six. Nine hun'red an'— Oh, Godfrey! Nine hun'red an'—"

"You're behind some," Butterball said. "Heard a feller who was over a thousan' an hour ago."

"Shut up, will you? Nine hunder an' eighty-nine—I never knowed there was so many beans in the world, Butterball. Nine hun'red an' ninety-three—"

"I was thinkin' on the way back, Gabby. Seems though Felch would figger folks would git them empty jars an'—"

"One thousand an' one—shut up, you human mushmelon! One thousan' an' two. Why don't you help, huh? You kin count up to seven. Make li'l piles of sevens an' I'll multiply an'—"

"Got two more days after this one," Butterball yawned, and eased his corpulent chassis into the bunk. "I got to git one thing off my mind 'fore I count beans. Somethin' that keeps eatin' me."

"I tol' you to air out your clothes yesterday mornin'," Gabby sniffed. "One thousan' an' six—nope, that was only half a bean. One thousan' an six an' a half—one thousan'—"

"Four hundred broncs in this town, I bet, an' we got to walk, Gabby. We lose an'—"

"Four hun'red an' ten—oh, ding-donged the gol-blasted horses, I mean beans—one thousan' an eleven—"

Butterball snored. He woke up with Gabby shaking him. "Look, Butterball, I'll never git through with them beans 'fore my head busts. We can't win. Let's make our excape. They ain't watchin' us close."

Butterball pawed at his face and shook the cobwebs out of his head. "If I could only think of somethin' I just can't seem to. Like human nature bein' the same everywheres an'—awright, we excape tonight."

They waited until the street lamps were on. Then they left their little abode, got to the foot of the hill, and broke into a run when they picked up a narrow road.

Crack! Pi-i-ing! Gabby Snead's hat fell over his eyes. *Crack! Zing!* Butterball jumped a foot into the air and had his hands up toward the moon before he came down again. "Let's go back," he grunted. Reaching the main street, their hands still aloft, they met the sheriff and two other grinning citizens. "You fergot my lookout tower on the roof of the church, huh? Let me show you somethin' else as it is the quickest way outa town."

THE chastened cowpokes were led up the street and a strange contraption pointed out to them. It was a chute greased with lard. It snaked all the way down to the base of the big rounded hill.

"Elucidate," Butterball said in a cracked voice.

"The way we generally send undesirables outa Bedrock where Obit Dyer has his undertakin' parlor. Saves hisself a climb. Ones we shoot or hang slide into Obit's parlor. Reason you two jaspers ain't yet, Euclid has a bet with you, huh?"

"It is all clear to me," Gabby Snead croaked. "Don't bother explainin' no more. Come on, Butterball."

"We sure better count them beans now," the fat man forced out.

"Furthermore we have to win. Or we chute the chute," Gabby squeaked.

"When that bullet went through my hat, I got a shock that made part of my brain work that wa'n't workin' earlier, Gabby," Butterball whispered. "I figger you saw the corral down there at the foot of the hill, huh? Well, I did. They keep most of the broncs there to save wear and tear on 'em. No bronc could live over two years if it had to climb up an' down this benighted town. That chute'll come in handy, win or lose."

"If we excape, we'll have to go to work," Gabby moaned. "Out of the fry-

in' pan plumb smack into the fire, yep."

"Not if we win two hun'red an' fifty dollars!" Butterball said. "You go on home an' count the beans. I'll be there later."

"I'm scairt outa my long Johns," Gabby admitted. "Hurry up an' come back, huh? In this town even you look like a love birdie to me."

Butterball ducked into a side street that plunged straight down. When he slipped into the little shack half an hour later, Gabby was stretched out on the bunk sleeping like a six-weeks-old full of paregoric.

Butterball Epps took some beans and dumped them into a little tin container. Then he spilled them out and began to count. He counted eight hundred and eighty beans, marked the total on an old scrap of paper, then called it a day.

In the morning they set forth to the Bedrock Springs restaurant and exchanged a six-gun for a breakfast for two. "My gun," Gabby groaned as they returned to their shack to count beans again. "I feel plumb naked."

"Now look," Butterball said. "I am followin' a hunch, Gabby. We are goin' to win the contest, but the next thing will be to git out of town. Now listen to me close!"

Gabby Snead listened. After he was through he told Butterball not to go out in the hot sun again without his hat. "I will keep what you said in mind," he choked out sorrowfully. "Let's git to countin' ag'in."

On the eve of the day when Filbert Felch was to hand the winner the prize money, Gabby Snead and Butterball, eyes red-rimmed, brains aching like frustrated hearts, slumped over an old table and gazed at the sum total of a jar of beans. "Godfreymighty, Butterball," the skinny man sighed. "Seven thousan', six hun'red an' eighty-one! I never figgered human bein's could ever count that high."

"Now remember, Gabby. I colleck the prize. You know where you're s'posed to be standin' when Felch announces the winner."

"Yep, but you're loco. I don't see no way out, li'l pardner."

BEDROCK SPRINGS was all agog. It was the zero hour. Forty citizens of both genders crowded the walk in front of Filbert Felch's store. Butterball Epps kept close to the sheriff. Gabby Snead hung back on the fringe of the crowd. Euclid Billdilly, wearing a new serge suit, supremely confident, strutted about and was already consoling the losers.

Filbert Felch raised a hand. "Ladies an' gents This is the big day. Guess you've all been countin' beans an' fillin' jars the same size as the one in my winder. Ha! I have got all the final counts an' will now announce the winner!"

Gabby Snead sneaked out into the street. Butterball Epps planted himself right behind the Bedrock Springs lawman.

"The winnah! With six thousan', eight hundred, an' one beans—Butterball Epps!"

There was a moment of outraged, stunned silence. Euclid Billdilly protested in a wild high-pitched voice. "It's a frame-up! There had to be seven thousan' an' six hun'red odd beans! I know my 'rithmetic! Arrest that fat—!"

Butterball Epps reached out and grabbed the guns the lawman toted a split second before the sheriff's eager hands went for them. The fat cowpuncher quickly jumped toward Euclid and prodded the muzzles in the judge's short-ribs.

Filbert Felch was yelpping, "Shore, you kept ribbin' me about that tin of cavvyair, huh? Well, you won't no more. I didn't say what was in the glass jar 'sides the beans! Somehow that fat stranger—!"

"Sheriff!" Euclid howled. "Arrest them fakers!"

"He got my guns!" the lawman screeched.

"Shore, Euclid, an' they're stickin' in your briskets," Butterball roared. "Anybody lifts a six-gun an' I lets blaze. Four hun'red dollars fer that old barn was robbery, an' you know it. Felch, come down here an' put that prize money in my pocket, *sabe?* I'm in a hurry. I'm a desperate man an' my trigger-fingers are itchin'!"

Filbert Felch seemed pleased to obey. When he stepped in behind Butterball, he

chuckled. "Smartest hombre in town, Fatty. These jokers had it comin'!" He stuffed a roll of bills in the pocket of Butterball's pants, then quickly hopped away.

"You won't never git away with it!" Euclid yelped.

"Want to bet ag'in? If we ever hear anythin' happened to Filbert Felch, me an' my pardner gathers a hun'red owl-hoots we know an' come back to burn your sinful town right offen this anthill!" Butterball roared. "Awright, I'm movin' backwards, Euclid. Start movin' with me, yep!"

GABBY SNEAD, recovering from the shock that had hit him when he heard the name of the winner and the amount of beans that was way off the total he had counted, spun on his heels, jumped into the chute and slid at forty miles per hour down out of Bedrock Springs. His job was to get the horses and have them ready.

"Yep, Euclid," Butterball mocked as he back stepped toward the same chute. "Filbert Felch made you eat that goat of his you kept gittin'. Only it was a can of that cavvyair, huh? Human nature don't change much an'—no, you don't!"

Bang!

A Bedrock citizen had tried to sneak in a shot. Just after the pipe in his mouth had disappeared in many little pieces, he dove into the watering trough. Butterball, six yards from the strange exit out of Bedrock Springs, looked up and saw the hombre sitting on the sheriff's lookout on the church roof. He had a Winch trained on something down below. The fat cowpoke knew for sure what it was. Butterball fired. The lookout let out a yell, toppled off his flimsy perch and rolled down the roof, off the church, and into a big rain barrel.

"Don't shoot!" Euclid Billdilly pleaded in a mushy voice.

"Nice figgerin', you ol' banty!" Butterball yipped. "Better than what you did with them beans. Didn't you have sense enough to figger out that anybody would think of gittin' the same size jar, fill it with beans, an' then count 'em? I could of died with stitches when Felch dumped that jar of beans—an' out of it comes that tin of surgeon's eggs! Knowed there was a catch to it, Euclid!"

Butterball saw the sheriff ease out from behind the one tree i the town and he held a rifle. Butterball threw a shot. A man-sized handful of splinters flew off the bole of the locust and imbedded themselves in various parts of the lawman's physiognomy. He dropped the Winch and slid headfirst under the porch of Felch's store.

"Never had so much fun!" Butterball bawled. "I figger my pardner ought to have them broncs now, huh? Here I am right at the old shoot-the-shoots. *Adios,* Euclid!" He lifted his right boot, planted it against Euclid's posterior and gave a mighty shove. The mathematician hit the street on his chin a good ten feet away. Then Butterball Epps was in the chute and leaving town at a rate of speed he'd never figured possible for any human being.

"Gobs of fire!" the fat cowpuncher yipped as he negotiated a slight turn in the chute. Then he flew clear of it and landed in a pile of hay fifty feet from the mouth of the slide, bounced once and landed right between the angel bones of a cadaverous-looking character holding a rifle.

Gabby Snead helped Butterball up. "Who was that?" the rotund waddy asked, his mind a little fogged.

"The corpse rustler!" Gabby yelled. "Had me dead to rights when I brought them horses out, Butterball. But we ain't got no time to brush him off an' see if you didn't kill him. Them things that are buzzin' aroun' ain't yaller-tailed hornets! You got that dinero?"

"Sure as all aitch never made li'l green apples, Gabby," the fat cowpoke howled, and climbed atop his old four-legged friend.

UP ON the hill, the artillery barrage continued. Gabby called out as he felt horseflesh quiver under him, "Somebody is comin' down the chute, Butterball, holdin' two Colts. It's the sheriff an' —look, he overshot! He went right

through the side of the undertaker's house. You hear that crash?"

Butterball Epps, having confiscated the mortician's Winch, swung around in the saddle and emptied its contents in the general direction of Bedrock Springs. Shingles spewed off the roof of the church and something blew up.

"Musta been some black powder in the hardware store," Butterball grinned, threw the rifle away, and headed for the peaceful hills. He drew abreast of Gabby Snead five miles away and let a lot of pent-up breath hiss out.

"Got our broncs an' another hun'red to boot, Gabby. We made money on the deal."

"Tell me later, you tub of lard. I ain't far enough away from that hive of Satan yet to suit me. There was some splinters in that chute which makes ridin'—"

Two hours later, far beyond the jurisdiction of the lawman of Bedrock Springs, the improvident pair dismounted and sprawled out among the ferns growing in a bosky dell. For a long time they said nothing, their escape had been that narrow.

"Look, Butterball," Gabby said. "I admit I ain't no mental giant, but that figger you give Filbert Felch wasn't our count."

"Of course it wasn't, you ignoramus," the chunky cowpuncher grinned. "After I left you that night, I went an' got a shrimp tin outa the dump. I come back an' filled it with beans, then counted 'em, so's I could find out how much space a cavvyair can would take up in Felch's glass jar of beans. Then I takes the amount an' subtracts it from the total we got, which made the correct answer an' had to be."

Gabby Snead sighed, groped for words that kept sidestepping him. "And Euclid called himself a mathmarician, huh? Butterball, shake!"

"That's all I been doin' since we got to Bedrock Springs, you animated saplin'," Butterball sniffed, but he put out his hand. "Well, like I always said, there's easier ways of makin' a livin' than workin' for it, Gabby." He picked up his old hat and counted three holes in the crown. "That is, most of the time, anyways."

"Butterball, I am so hungry I could eat your cookin' right now. What we got to rustle up?"

"Only a pocket full of beans."

"Huh? Well, I always figgered people et too much, Butterball, especially ones that shy at physical labor," the thin man sighed. "But there was jack in the beantalk, huh?"

The fat fiddlefoot grinned. "Let's count it, Gabby."

A grasshopper viewed the proceedings from the leaf of a noxious weed. It nodded its noggin, then hopped away to play the live-long day. Work? Not on your Uncle Dudley. Not when he had so many ants living nearby.

Oblivious to the sorry example they had set for the shiftless citizens of the insect world, Butterball and Gabby Snead slept.

Benson's Lost Bonanza

By Nat McKelvey

A true tale of the search for Jim Benson's hidden hoard of silver.

JIM BENSON was a Negro who could dance like a whirling dervish. Moreover, he gambled with the prodigality of a Diamond Jim Brady or of Satan. Yet he is remembered less for these things than for the fabulous silver mine he found and lost.

From Jim's mine came a sheet of nearly pure silver weighing, by old Spanish measure, one hundred and forty-nine *arrobas*—3725 pounds! Balls of pure silver ranging from the size of a pea to the girth of a wagon wheel spewed from this mine in seemingly endless profusion.

In 1878, Jim Benson, soldier in the service of the United States, stood at attention before his sergeant major. The place was Fort Huachuca, one of Arizona's most famous outposts during the campaigns against the hostile Apache Indians.

"Hate to see you go," the sergeant drawled, genuine affection showing in his voice. "You've been a good soldier."

"Thank you, suh." Jim answered softly, just a hint of the South in his speech.

"Well, Jim," continued the sergeant, putting his initials on Benson's papers, "the colonel has signed your discharge. You are on your own. What you going to do?"

A faraway look entered the black man's eyes. "Don't you fret, suh," he offered. "I've got work to do—down by the border."

Accepting the sergeant's outstretched hand, Jim Benson shook it sharply, saluted, about-faced and passed through the door of headquarters, forever out of army life.

He did not turn at once toward the near-by Mexican border. Instead, he mounted his mule, and jogged away toward Tombstone. At this time, the city of evil, quick money, and quicker death was a roaring cesspool of 15,000 greedy, lusty men and a few women. It was a brawling, seething maelstrom of silver-crazed humanity, knowing no standards save wealth, caring for no other. Falling across this howling wilderness, as the law, was the long shadow of Sheriff John Slaughter, hard, determined, honest by the standards of the day.

It was the hustle and bustle of this town that greeted Jim Benson. The swift swirl of it engulfed him and his mule, making him forget, momentarily, the days of his army service down Mexico way. The ghosts of his border patrol days fled from his conscious mind as the thought that he must now find food dominated him.

Benson hitched his mule at the rack and hesitantly pushed into the Oriental Saloon. Granite-hard miners, drinking noisily, turned from the bar to survey the six-foot, loose-jointed, powerful black man. Gamblers scarcely noticed him. They were too busy with the suckers whose money flowed like water in a millrace as they bucked the tiger at the faro banks.

Jim Benson pulled a small mouth organ from his shirt front, the army tunic that he still wore. Softly at first, then louder, he began blowing a Southern jig. As he blew, his feet began to shuffle. Abruptly,

the eyes of drinkers and gamblers alike were on him. Hostile they were in the beginning. Then, as Jim jigged with all the artistry of true talent, miners, laborers, cowboys, adventurers broke into spontaneous applause. Coins began falling around Jim Benson, some of them double eagles of pure gold.

FROM that day, Jim became a popular figure in the saloons and gambling halls of Tombstone. Seldom, during his intricate jigs and reels, would he misstep. If he occasionally did, he made it up to his audience in an unusual way, a way that showed his gambler's strain.

"Oops!" he would howl. "Missed one that time." Instantly, he would fling back not only all the money tossed his way but double that amount. This subtlety added zest to the game, and Jim soon had all Tombstone vying to fling money at him and try to make him misstep.

There came a day when Jim disappeared briefly from the saloons. Rumor had it, or more exactly, the gossip of a big Negro called Bob, that Jim Benson was heading for some treasure trove known only to himself.

Bob swore that Jim Benson had promised to prepare a map to this golconda, a tremendous silver hill, revealed to Benson by a Yaqui Indian. Bob declared positively that Jim had found this mine during his scouting days along the border. But Bob died without ever extracting a map to Benson's bonanza.

Some folks declared they had seen Jim Benson leaving Tombstone with a three-mule pack team in tow. He was headed south.

Ten days passed and Jim Benson returned. Like wildfire, word rushed through Tombstone.

"Benson's back! Brought with him a whole load of ore, almost pure silver at that!"

Dan Woods, a banker with usury in his heart and nitric acid in his veins, sent for Benson.

"How much silver you got?" he demanded.

"Oh, I reckon mighty near three hundred pounds," Jim Benson responded.

"Give you $500 for it." Woods spoke abruptly, with finality.

Jim Benson accepted the miserly offer and each two months for the next three years he repeated his trip to his hidden pile of wealth. For each trip, he received $500, an investment that brought Woods a profit many times over.

All Tombstone, it seemed, sought the secret of the sequestered hoard. They plied Jim with liquor, dined him, gave him presents, showered him with gold as he danced for them in Tombstone's hot spots. In truth, Jim Benson was getting rich more quickly from these attentions than from scrabbling in the bowels of the earth after silver.

To loosen his tongue, enterprising adventurers tried getting Jim drunk. From their efforts, they learned merely that Jim had a tremendous capacity for bottled spirits and that instead of becoming loquacious, he merely got drunk, slipped under the table, and fell into a profound sleep.

Next, Tombstone's less scrupulous, more enterprising denizens tried trailing Benson to his hidden hoard. From Tombstone, they followed him beyond Fairbanks, north of Fort Huachuca, then southwest to the area of Kino's Tumacacori Mission. There in the gullies and cactus-studded wastes, Jim Benson invariably eluded pursuit.

It was significant that Jim should frequent the Tumacacori territory. Here it was that the Indians mined precious metals. Here, too, the *padres* of Kino's Mission knew the secrets of the earth's wealth.

MODERN researchers are convinced that Jim Benson's mine was the famous *Planchas de Plata,* or Silver Plate diggings of the early Spanish colonials. It was from these mines that the 3725-pound sheet of silver glance came. It was so huge that Indian laborers had to cut it into bits before they could reduce it to size for hauling by burro train. This, of course, was before Jim Benson's time.

Old Spanish records indicate that the *Planchas de Plata* was accidentally discovered in 1730 by a priest. This worthy

picked up a chunk of silver the size of a baseball. Soon, other stout friars, aided by Indian converts, worked the mines, using the metal to adorn the new missions that were springing up in the Kino chain.

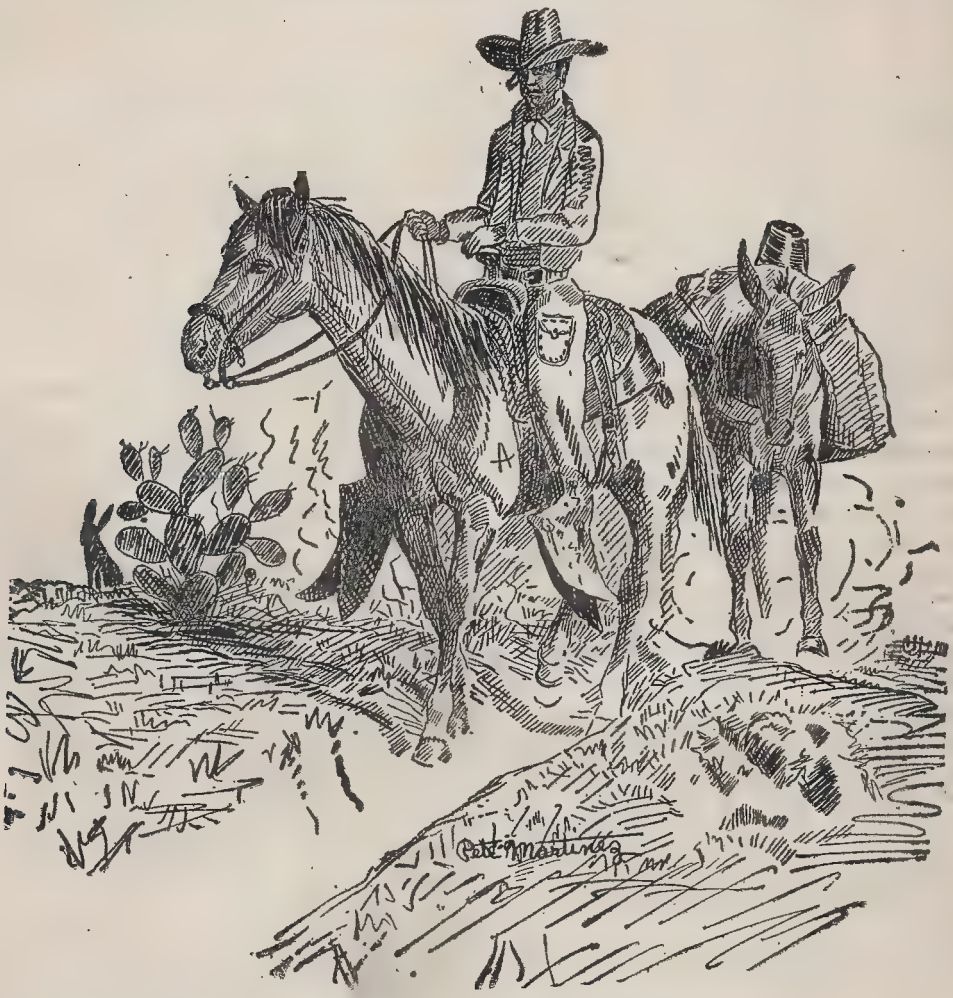
Folks in Jim Benson's Tombstone recalled the *Planchas de Plata*. In great agitation, stirred by greed visions, they took sterner measures to separate Benson's secret from him.

Under pressure, Sheriff John Slaughter permitted one of his deputies to arrest Benson on some fabricated charge, probably the equivalent of the modern "drunk and disorderly" or "destroying city property." Tombstone's denizens, actually, performed pistol mayhem on street lights and windows as a regular thing. Nobody wished them in jail.

Nevertheless, Jim Benson was jailed and his shooting-iron taken away. Each day to Benson's cell in the Tombstone *juzgado* came Slaughter's deputy. His question was always the same.

"Where's the mine, Jim?"

Each day for a week, Benson answered with a blank stare.



At length came the proposition.

"I'll let you go," offered the deputy, "if you'll tell where you get your silver."

Benson refused. Next day the deputy repeated the offer. Again Benson refused. On the third day, however, he greeted the proposition with a soft, "yes, suh." In his eyes shone the light of cunning.

"All right, Jim," gasped the deputy,

agitated by what he thought the imminent revelation of great riches. "Tell me."

"Not so fast," countered Jim. "You got to let me outa this jailhouse first. Then I'll talk."

Blinded by greed, the deputy cast aside caution. He opened the cell, letting Benson into the corridor.

That was the deputy's first mistake. His second, forgetting to duck. Jim Benson smashed a pile-driver fist to the lawman's chin, saw him sag into deep sleep. Without further observation, Benson fled the jail.

At the OK Corral, he picked up his pack mules and riding animal, a few personal effects, including a belt full of hard money, and burned the road away from Tombstone. Witnesses say he headed south, apparently for his mines.

Jim Benson was never again seen in Tombstone.

A few days after Jim broke jail, white men and Indian trackers were hot on his trail. They found neither Jim Benson nor his mules. Instead, they found only tracks. The tracks of Jim's jacks turned west instead of east toward Tombstone.

Jim Benson, experts concluded, had reached his mine, loaded his animals with ore and started home for Tombstone. Bushwhack bullets cut him down before he arrived.

TO THIS day, no one knows who killed Benson or what they did with his body. Perhaps he didn't die at all—not then. Perhaps the trail he left was a purposeful thing, his wily mind's invention to confuse forever those who sought to wrest from him the fruits of his great bonanza.

For those who would search out Benson's hoard, history leaves some clues. But before searching, remember that many famous persons have trod the same road before, wringing from it nothing but failure. One such was a member of the Spanish house of Bourbon, Count Rousseth de Bourbon, who spent many months vainly scouring the Mexican wastelands for the *Planchas de Plata*. Fate had reserved it for Jim Benson.

Spanish sources place the mine one league east of the junction of 31.5 degrees north, 111.5 degrees west of Greenwich. Other documents say the mines were four leagues southwest of Kino's Tumacacori Mission. The ruins of this proud shrine remain today some fifty-seven miles south of Tucson, Arizona, on the highway to Nogales, Mexico.

At least one account gives the location of this mine as the Magdalena district of northern Mexico, the state of Sonora. Dissenters say the mines are in Arizona, forty leagues north of Altar, Mexico, near Aqua Caliente.

In all of these calculations, the particular value of the league is not stated. It could, according to present day scientists, vary from 2.4 miles to 4.6 miles per unit.

Even in the matter of Jim Benson's death, accounts differ. One story says an Indian was guiding him to a mound called Big Antelope, somewhere near Sycamore Springs, Arizona. Big Antelope, according to the red man, was more fabulous than the highly productive Rich Hill, called by the Indians Little Antelope.

Here, too, accounts diverge. Rich Hill was a gold strike—not silver. From the surface of this projection, prospectors took $780,000 in nuggets. From the bowels of the mountain, more than twenty millions in gold.

If this was what Jim Benson expected to duplicate at Big Antelope, he was doomed to failure. His Indian guide slaughtered him in cold blood. This story does suggest, however, that Benson survived the so-called ambush on the road to Tombstone. Perhaps, after all, Jim Benson went on to bigger things.

Like Jim, money-hungry adventurers will continue to search for fabulous wealth until the end of time. Unfortunately, a sufficient number of "lost" mines are rediscovered to keep the public appetite for easy money ever whetted.

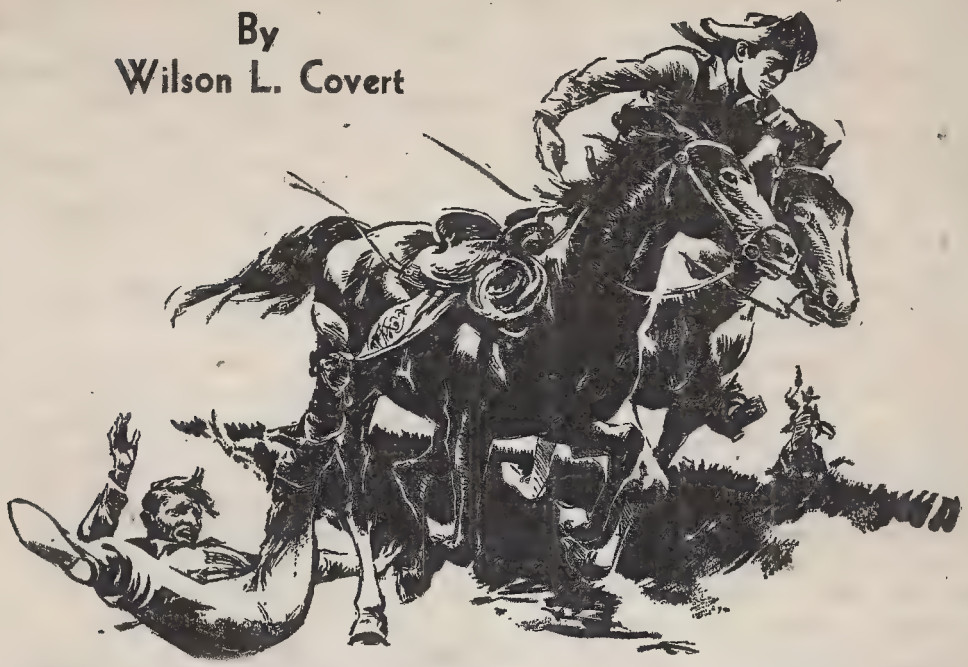
In recent years, prospectors have located the Lost Mine with the Iron Door, the Lost Shepherd Mine, and the Lost Padre Mine, all in the wilds of Arizona.

But the list of searchers who have failed is long. The roll call of those who died in the attempt, even longer.

Will you risk the fate of Jim Benson?

Sidekicks in a Jackpot

By
Wilson L. Covert



When these two saddlemates set out to make some pay dirt by helping out the law, the cards were stacked against them. But instead of a dinero dividend, they drew a pistol pay check.

CLELL YATES and his sidekick, Mark Taggart, were packing their warbags when old Alf Carew stuck his gray head in the bunkhouse doorway.

"Here's your pay checks, boys," said the Fiddleback owner, his weather-scarred face mournful. "I hate to lay you off, but I can't carry a couple of tophands through the summer. Now that the calf brandin' is over, Joan and Billy can help me do what herdin's necessary."

Yates and Taggart scuffed to the door. They were well-knit, hawkfaced young men, burned to the color of saddle leather, and both in their early twenties. Yates was sandy-haired, smooth-shaven; Taggart had brown hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. Their expressions were doleful as Carew's as they took the pay checks, glancing at the tall girl and the slim boy standing behind the boss. Joan and Billy had come with their father to say good-by.

"You know, Mr. Carew," said Yates, "we'd be willin' to keep on ridin' for our grub till fall. Then, if the weather favors you, you'll be able to make a good beef shipment, pay us and get rid of the plaster on your outfit."

"Yeh," added Taggart, "we talked it over, Mr. Carew. All packed, but we can unpack if you'll agree. No other jobs in prospect and we like the place."

Clell and Mark were looking at Joan, not at the old cowman. A supple, sunburnt girl of cowland, she was worth any man's attention. Her long-lashed eyes were clouded at the imminent parting. In the mind of each tophand was the question whether she would feel his absence more

than his saddlemate's. During the time they had worked for the Fiddleback, Joan had treated both with equal good fellowship, knowing they worshiped the ground she trod.

Alf Carew, faintly smiling, shook his head. "I appreciate your ofter, boys, but I won't allow you to gamble with me. The weather's too uncertain. By next fall, if the cattle don't come through in shape to lift the mortgage, the Lipan bank will own the Fiddleback. Come back and see me if you're in the country around shippin' time."

They promised they would and turned to get their warbags. The handshaking that followed was a solemn business, especially when Clell and Mark faced Joan. She wished them luck and turned away quickly. Young Billy stood beside his father as the cowboys stalked to the corral, such a look on his freckled face as hadn't been there since his pet hound was killed at the railroad crossing. It was like parting with elder brothers to see Clell and Mark ride away for the last time.

THE cowpunchers glanced back as they jogged down the trail toward Lipan. The old man and the boy were still watching from the corner of the bunkhouse, but the girl had disappeared.

Clell, facing front, said, "Best people on the range. Wish we had money enough to break the bank's grip on the place, then the old man wouldn't have to worry so much about the weather."

Mark stared at his horse's bobbing ears. "Good as they are, no nineteen-year-old girl and a boy hardly fifteen will be able to handle them longhorns. Where we lookin' for work, Clell?"

"You've got me there, Mark. Nobody's hirin' extra hands now."

As they slanted down a boulder-strewn ridge, the town of Lipan broke to view, a drab collection of 'dobes and frame false fronts beside a "streak of rust." The railroad had extended a spur line there but a year ago, and stagecoaches were still running, a constant target for Griff Corley's outlaw band. Between the town and the ridge, small mesquite trees relieved the monotony of the dun plain. Cattle drovers of the region had worn a winding path through the mesquite to the center of trade.

Yates and Taggart spied a group of dismounted horsemen among the trees before quitting the ridgeside. They thought nothing of it until a turn of the mesquite-bordered trail brought them closer to the party. All but one were garbed like cowhands, the exception being a heavy-set man in broadcloth and low-crowned hat. Taking a small sack from his coat pocket, he handed it to a big, rawboned fellow with bared six-shooter.

Yates checked his mount, shifting excited eyes to his companion. "A holdup, by golly! That heavy feller's Bret Raybold, the express agent. Big guy must be Griff Corley, though he's not masked. Wait, Mark! They ain't seen us and there's a big reward for the gang. You go to the right and I'll head left, try'n catch 'em between us. Raybold will pitch in if he gets half a chance."

Taggart, nodding quickly, drew his gun. They turned from the trail in opposite directions, avoiding the crackling underbrush, the low trees partly screening them. Yates swung out of the saddle when the broad back of the express agent was thirty yards away. Raybold was swearing. The big outlaw, Corley, broke into a raucous laugh.

"No use cussin', Raybold! I always get what's comin' to me."

Yates, pistol in hand, scuttled for a mesquite edging the trail. An outlaw saw him as he streaked to cover. A bullet thudded into the tree as he slammed down at its foot, yelling, "Hit the ground, Bret!" The express agent, flinging a startled glance over his shoulder, buckled at the knees. Yates thumbed a shot at the bandit with the smoke-wreathing Colt, spun him on high heels. Grin Corley, his eyes bugging out in surprise, stuffed the sack in a hip pocket, whipped lead at the half-hidden puncher. The gang was backing toward the horses when Mark Taggart's .45 stuttered behind them.

"They's a bunch of 'em, boys!" Cor-

ley shouted hoarsely. "Got to fight our way out!" He scrambled into leather, and as his bronc jumped under a stabbing spur, the outlaw's gun swiveled toward the prostrate express agent. "You set a trap for us, Raybold?"

"No, no!" screamed Raybold, rolling frantically in the dust to escape the expected bullet.

Yates threw down and Corley lurched in the saddle. His men, with guns spitting pale flame left and right, swept past him down the trail. He started after them, gripping his saddle horn. Clell sprang up and raced for his horse. Topping the animal, he kicked it into a gallop, quitting the mesquite as Griff Corley spilled headlong from his ground-grabbing mount. But he didn't fall clear; his body jerked helplessly along the ground, to rebound against the frightened horse. Clell saw that Griff's right foot was trapped in the stirrup.

CORLEY'S gang showed signs of pulling up to aid the leader. But Mark Taggart spurred into the trail back of Yates at that moment. Apparently fearful that the mesquite was full of manhunters, the outlaws pelted on. Corley's horse, trying to follow, was impeded by his dragging weight. Yates pounded in its wake, gaining at every leap. Presently he was racing neck and neck. He reached out to grasp the runaway's bridle, crowded it to the side of the trail.

As he brought the snorting animal to a stand, Taggart hammered up and flung from the saddle. Stooping, Mark worked the outlaw's foot free of the stirrup iron. Yates, with a glance at the fleeing gang, joined his saddlemate on the ground.

"He oughta be dead," remarked Taggart, "but he ain't." The cowboy felt along the unconscious Corley's right leg. "Ankle sprained, I guess, but no bones broke. One of them fellers that was born to be hung."

Corley was bleeding profusely from a wound under his right arm, and Yates wasn't so sure he would live. "Anyway," said Clell, "he's been a nuisance to the express company and they're offerin' $1,000 for him, dead or alive. Think what Alf Carew could do with that money." He rolled the big owlhooter on his side, pulled the sack from his hip pocket. "This belongs to Bret. Griff was gettin' bolder, holdin' up a man so close to town."

Clell turned his gaze up the trail. The express agent was coming toward them, mounted on a dun horse. Bret Raybold's broad face was apprehensive as he drew near, rapping out a question. "Is he dead?"

"No," said Clell, rising and tossing him the sack. "There's your dinero. Lucky for you we happened to ride this way, Bret. Were you headin' in or out of Lipan when they stopped you?"

"Out, on express company business," replied Raybold. "That fellow you drilled up the trail is dead as a stone, Clell."

Yates nodded grimly. "That makes two of 'em we collect on, Bret—$1,000 for Griff, coupla hundred maybe for his gunrider. Sorry we didn't get the whole gang. It would've made a sizable reward."

"Sounds like you're keen for blood money." Raybold's tone was almost reproving.

"We ain't killer-minded," said Yates, with a glance at his sidekick, "but them road agents are a bad lot. And Mark and me, bein' out of work, can use that money as well as the next feller. Yeh, old man Carew had to pay us off. See to it we get the reward that's due us, will you, Bret?"

"Sure," replied Raybold. "It'll have to come from company headquarters. Take a little time."

Griff Corley groaned, opened bloodshot eyes which roved from the grim-faced stockhands to the nervous express agent. "Raybold—" he began.

"You can't blame me for gettin' caught, Griff," Raybold interrupted him hurriedly.

Yates and Taggart looked at the agent in disgust. Mark said, "What you scared of, Bret? He can't hurt you. Didn't you *want* him run down?"

"Naturally," answered Bret. "He's robbed the company of thousands."

Locked up in the Lipan calaboose, Corley was visited by the local medico, who expressed confidence of his recovery. The

dead bandit was buried. Sheriff "Yuma" Leeds, a tough little man who felt his importance as peace officer, was much put out that a couple of cowhands had succeeded where he had failed.

For a week, Yates and Taggart hung around town, waiting for the reward money. Raybold said it hadn't come through, although he had reported Corley's capture to express headquarters immediately. The punchers didn't tell him it was their intention to pass the money along to Alf Carew, if the old cowman would take it.

The second week of waiting was well advanced when, one evening, a gaunt figure in patched shirt and trousers and worn boots wandered into town, driving a burro. Cy Juggins, prospector, was a well-known character in Lipan. For the better part of two years he had been roaming the Sombrero Peaks range, east of the town, sometimes fetching in a little poke of dust, more often arriving with empty pockets. If he had gold he always blew it on red-eye.

CLELL and Mark were leaning on the saloon hitchrack as the prospector shuffled into the lighted area. There were some who said that old Juggins was going crazy from the loneliness and constant gold seeking.

"Howdy, old-timer?" Yates greeted him. "What luck?"

Juggins' burro lay down in the street and the gold hunter slowly approached the rack. "A little, a little," he replied, eyeing the two cowboys sharply. "Enough to get a jag on. But someday I'll be roarin' in here to buy the town. There's a bonanza in the Sombreros. I'll find it yet."

He went on into the saloon. Heavy footsteps sounded on the sidewalk and Bret Raybold moved into the light. He pretended not to see Yates and Taggart until they stepped between him and the door.

"Bret," said Clell, "company headquarters is takin' a mighty long time to pay up."

"Can't help it," retorted the express agent irritably. "You fellows are a heap bothersome, askin' me every few days. I want you to cut it out. When the money comes in, I'll let you know."

Raybold shouldered by, heading for the bar. Mark said in a low voice, "Think he's holdin' out on us?"

"Don't know," replied Clell. "Might be he figures he ought to get a cut. But he didn't raise a hand to capture Corley. I'm tired waitin'."

Later that night, as they lounged on a bench in front of the saloon, the half-pint sheriff strutted from the shadows and halted before the cowhands. He spoke raspingly, his mustache ends seeming to bristle.

"It's goin' on two weeks you fellers been bummin' round and there's a law against vagrants stoppin' in Lipan. Come mornin', you'll hit the breeze or tangle with me. Savvy?"

Mark, shorter-tempered than Clell, started up with an angry exclamation, but Clell pushed him back, answering the lawman:

"Look, Yuma, we're only waitin' for that reward money. Raybold says he hasn't received it."

"Nothin' to me," Yuma Leeds said crustily. "But you can't loaf here another day. Leave a forwardin' address with Raybold." Inside the barroom a shrill voice was raised in a war whoop and the sheriff jerked up his head. "That'll be Juggins, ready for the hoosegow," Leeds clipped out and made for the door, unsheathing his Colt.

Yates and Taggart didn't follow. They weren't interested in watching Leeds slam old Juggins cold. Mark was still hot under the collar about that order to trail their spurs. Clell didn't like it himself.

"You reckon Bret put that bantam tin-badge up to chasin' us out, so's he could keep the reward?" Mark asked. "For a plugged peso, I'd stay and smoke up Leeds, then go after Raybold, make him fork over."

"We're not sure yet that Bret aims to cheat us, Mark," returned Clell. "Yuma is sore because we beat him to the reward. The sight of us keeps remindin' him. Anyway, we're not mixin' smoke with the law."

Cy Juggins' yelling had ceased abrupt-

ly. A few moments later the sheriff reappeared, trailed by two men carrying the insensible prospector. As they turned in the direction of the calaboose, Yates suddenly dropped a hand on his saddlemate's leather-clad knee.

"Say, Mark, long as we have to leave town before the money arrives, why not go prospectin'? We have the dinero for miner's kits and some grub. Juggins does find gold in the Sombrero Peaks now and then. He may even be right about there bein' a rich vein somewhere. While we're lookin' around, we won't forget to ride back and prod Bret for the reward."

"I've a hunch he's aimin' to skin us, Clell," said Mark.

BEFORE noon the next day, their horses were pointed for the Sombrero Peaks, each cowhand equipped for gold seeking, with a sack of grub behind his saddle. From the doorway of the express office, Bret Raybold saw them depart and was greatly relieved. Now he could go ahead with a certain plan without danger of those scrappy cowhands interferring. Before they could return and bait him for that reward money locked in his private safe. Griff Corley would be footloose again, itching to kill the men responsible for his being jugged.

Clell and Mark found places in the mountain range where Cy Juggins had swung his pick, but finally abandoned the holes in the ground. They didn't waste time lingering at these spots. Maybe old Juggins was half crazy, but he knew gold when he saw it and would never leave a prospect that held out the faintest hope. At the end of a week of fruitless seeking, they camped above a gorge through which rushed the Milltail River, not aware that for two days past a gaunt figure had been stalking them.

Taggart, in a bad humor over their poor luck, unsaddled the horses while Yates went in search of wood. Clell was kneeling to light the fire when the beat of hoofs and rumble of wheels caused him to look across the chasm. A Concord, bound for Lipan, was spinning along the mountain road, coach and six outlined

Save Your Marriage—Prevent Divorce!

YOU owe it to yourself to get ALL the facts straight on vital personal problems! Wrong beliefs can work terrible harm to your future.

Now—in this single, profusely illustrated book prepared by two famous specialists—you can learn the answers to intimate questions that have troubled you. SEX TODAY IN WEDDED LIFE and DOCTOR'S CONFIDENTIAL ADVICE—both books in one remarkable volume of 376 pages and scores of illustrations and anatomy charts, some in full color—give you straight-from-the-shoulder information and advice. Tells everything you should know about marital relations, latest scientific discoveries and approved remedies. Gives clear, simple directions that bring new happiness!

Answers Your Questions Frankly, Fearlessly, Clearly!

Learn the facts on such vital matters as Marriage Procedure; the Wedding Night; Sex Emotions; the Child's Sex Life and Education; Sex and Disease, as well as the latest discoveries on sex physiology.

Send No Money!

Don't guess or be in doubt any longer! SEX TODAY IN WEDDED LIFE and DOCTOR'S CONFIDENTIAL ADVICE will be rushed to you by return mail *in plain wrapper*. Just mail coupon below without money for 5-day examination. If not thoroughly pleased, return book for immediate refund.

Partial Contents

Wife's Responsibilities • Art of Love • Frigidity • Impotence • Birth Control • Venereal Disease • Marital Adjustments • Test Tube Baby • Sex and Baldness • Childless Couples

Mail Coupon Today
for 5-Day Examination

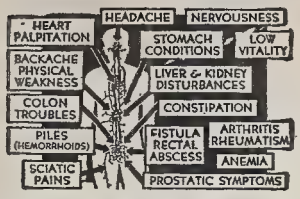
Simon Publications, Inc., Dept. N-1
220 Fifth Ave., New York 1, N. Y.
Rush by return mail in plain wrapper marked "PERSONAL" my copy of "SEX TODAY IN WEDDED LIFE" and "DOCTOR'S CONFIDENTIAL ADVICE" in one volume. I'll pay postman only $2.98 plus postage. If not thoroughly pleased after 5-day examination, I may return book for immediate refund of purchase price. (Not sold to persons under 21.)

Name..... *Age*.....
Address.....
City..... *Zone*..... *State*.....
If you wish to enclose $2.98 with coupon we'll pay postage. Same return privilege applies.

SENT ON APPROVAL!

Good News To Fistula Sufferers

Interesting FREE BOOK on Dangers of Delay



Illustrated, authentic 40-page book on Fistula, Piles (Hemorrhoids), related ailments and colon disorders is yours FREE. Write today. Thornton & Minor Clinic, Suite 462, 926 McGee St., Kansas City, Mo.

PATENTS

Write for information on what steps an inventor should take to secure a Patent.

RANDOLPH & BEAVERS, 908 Columbian Bldg., Washington, D. C.

Lost Mines

Authentic facts on 22 fabulous Western mines known to contain millions in treasure. Fascinating, and may be source of limitless wealth for lucky finders. 64-page book $1.00.

LOST MINES PRESS 1047 Irolo Street, Dept. 1-A Los Angeles 6, Calif.

USED Correspondence Courses

Complete HOME-STUDY Courses and self-instruction textbooks, slightly used. Rented, sold, exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Full details and 100-page illustrated bargain catalog FREE. Write NELSON CO., 1139 N. Wabash Ave., Dept. 13, Chicago 5, Ill.

SONGWRITERS

POEMS WANTED AT ONCE

Send Your Poems, Any Subject, for Immediate Examination and FREE BOOK:—"YOUR FUTURE IN SONGWRITING"

RADIO CITY MUSIC ACADEMY

1674 Broadway - - - - New York 19, N. Y.

WHY WEAR DIAMONDS

When diamond-dazzling Zircons from the mines of far-away mystic Siam are so *effective* and *inexpensive!* Thrilling beauty, stand acid, true backs, full of FIRE! Exquisite mountings. See before you buy. Write for FREE catalog.

National Zircon Co., Dept. 24 Wheeling, W.Va.

Catalog FREE!

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 40 years. Benj. J. Bogue, Dept. 5626, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

GET THIS FREE BOOK!

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.

30 Years in Business

THE NEWELL COMPANY 135 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK

against the crimson sky. Mark was watching it, too, and suddenly growled:

"Like to hold up that stage just once! I'd clear old man Carew's ranch and restock it, and then—" He paused as Clell turned piercing gaze on him.

"Marry Joan, if she'd have you," Clell said. "But she wouldn't if you played bandit, even once. That's crazy talk, Mark."

"Well," flared Mark, "we lose our jobs, get euchred out of that head bounty, and a week's gone by without our strikin' any color. Poor but honest, that's us. And I'm gettin' sick of it."

Clell laughed at his scowling face. "I'll admit we ain't picked up a horseshoe lately, but you'll feel better after you eat."

They were poking about in broken shale the next day when a party of six horsemen suddenly appeared on the stage road across the gorge. In the van rode the half-pint sheriff, whom the punchers eyed sourly until Yuma, standing in his stirrups, trumpeted:

"You fellers seen anything of Griff Corley? He busted jail last night."

"No," Clell shouted back, leaning on his pick. "How'd it happen?"

The sheriff answered, "Corley's gang walked into the jail office while me'n Bret Raybold were playin' checkers, holdin' the board on our laps. If Bret hadn't got excited, throwin' the checkerboard in my face as he jumped up, I'd 'a' started triggerin' before they had us dead to rights. When the gang left, Griff was with 'em."

Clell gave Mark a sharp look, faced the sheriff again. "Why didn't you arrest Bret? I bet you he helped 'em on purpose."

"Aw, Bret's all right except for bein' a little nervous." Leeds prodded his horse into motion. "If Corley finds out where you fellers are at, he'll try to get even."

WATCHING the posse until it vanished down a rocky slope, the cowhands went back to work, Mark observing bitterly, "That proves Raybold's a crook, stands in with the owlhooters, and we can kiss our reward money good-by!"

"I'd show him up I knew how," returned Clell thoughtfully. "Remember how funny he acted when we caught Griff? Afraid the bad hat would tell on him. That wasn't a holdup we saw."

That night, as Yates returned to the fire from staking out the horses, which were prone to wander, Taggart was staring into the darkness.

"Did you hear that burro bray?" he asked his saddlemate. "Off there to the north."

Clell said he hadn't heard anything but the horses.

"Guess old Juggins is camped near by and don't know we're here," Mark said. "I'll get him to join us."

"Good idea," Nodded Clell, dropping down at the fire as Mark strode away.

Yates rolled a quirly, had half finished it when the bark of a six-gun shook up the echoes. The bullet plowed into the fire, scattering a few brands. Snatching out his Colt, Clell rolled on his side. He saw the flash of the other gun near the gorge rim as a second slug sped toward him. It struck closer than the first bullet, and Yates crawled swiftly out of the firelight.

Clell's mind was a ferment. Had Mark invented that burro, which hadn't brayed again, as an excuse to slip out to the gorge rim and target Clell? Taggart was madly in love with Joan, just as Yates was. With the prospect of getting money to aid her father growing slimmer, perhaps Mark had turned on his sidekick, thinking to remove him as a rival and a hindrance to the stage robbery of which Mark had spoken. Clell hadn't thought he really meant it at the time. But, with the proceeds of a holdup and a plausible story to account for Yates's death, Taggart could return to the Fiddleback, put the owner on his feet and marry the girl.

Clell didn't want to believe it of Mark as he crept toward the gorge, taking advantage of every bit of rock cover. The bushwhack Colt bellowed as he crossed an open strip. He dived to cover, yelling, "Mark, is that you? Have you gone loco?" No answer. Clell thought of Griff Corley. But the outlaw chief was back with

...or Strange Natural Law?

THE PREMONITION or strange feeling that preceded the death of a relative...the incident you *remembered* before it happened. Have you had these or similar experiences? Are you brushing them aside? Can they be explained in such vague terms as superstition or supernaturalism? *Or,* are there *natural laws* of mind governing these things?

FREE Book Explains

Join the ranks of thinking men and women. Get to the *bottom* of things! Why be afraid of knowledge, when its acquisition can bring immeasurable happiness and achievement? Let the Rosicrucians (NOT a religion) show you how to use natural laws *effectively.* Write for fascinating FREE book, *The Mastery of Life,* which explains fully.

Address: Scribe L.Z.C.

TRUTHS AGELESS AS TIME

the Rosicrucians

SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIFORNIA

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!"

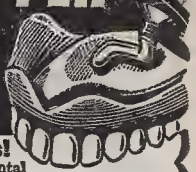
Help Bring Crooks to Justice Through Scientific

CRIME DETECTION!

I have taught thousands this exciting, profitable, pleasant profession. Let me teach you, **in your own home.** Learn Finger Printing, Firearms Identification, Police Photography, Criminal Investigation Methods thoroughly, at small cost. 53% of all American Bureaus of Identification employ I. A. S. students or graduates. I can prepare you for this fascinating work, during spare time. Write today, **stating age,** for "Blue Book of Crime."

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE, 1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7464 Chicago 40, Ill.

GUM GRIPPER
Tightens
FALSE TEETH
at NO COST



Lasts from 3 to 6 Months!
New discovery makes loose dental plates fit snug and comfortable for months—almost like having your own teeth again. For uppers and lowers.
Easy to Apply at Home... Simply squeeze some "GUM GRIPPER" evenly on your denture, put plate in your mouth where it sets and hardens in few minutes. No heat—no fuss—no muss. Will not harm any denture.
SEND NO MONEY...
Order a tube today, for only $1.00 (deposit with your own postman). Each application of "GUM GRIPPER" guaranteed to last from 3 to 6 months and delight you completely or your money will be cheerfully refunded.
GUM GRIPPER, INC.
127 N. Dearborn St., Dept. 80, Chicago 2, Ill.

SONGWRITERS
We are interested in all types of song poems and lyrics. Send us yours for FREE examination. If accepted Motion Picture Songwriter will collaborate with you. FIFTEEN YEARS' EXPERIENCE. Write to Paramount Song-Recording Studio, Dept. T-19, Box 190, Hollywood, Cal.

RAISE TURKEYS THE NEW WAY!
Write for free information explaining how to make up to $3000.00 in your own back yard. Address: NATIONAL TURKEY INSTITUTE, Dept. 273. Columbus, Kansas

ANY BOOK IN PRINT

Delivered at your door. We pay postage. Standard authors, new books, popular editions, fiction, reference, medical, mechanical, children's books, etc. All at guaranteed savings. Send card now for Clarkson's 1947 catalog.
FREE Write for our great illustrated book catalog. A short course in literature. The buying guide of 300,000 book lovers. The answer to your Christmas gift problem. Free if you write now—today!
CLARKSON PUBLISHING COMPANY
Dept. AC4-74, 1257 So. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Relieve Misery of ITCH
Relieve itching caused by eczema, athlete's foot, pimples—other itching troubles. Use cooling, medicated D.D.D. Prescription. Greaseless, stainless. Quiets itching fast. 35c trial bottle proves it—or money back. Ask your druggist for D.D.D. Prescription.

DO YOU WANT MONEY-LOVE-LUCK!
LOADSTONES Have been carried since Egyptain times to gain MONEY-LOVE-LUCK. Always carried in pairs in your pocket or purse. According to legend one is to draw and attract GOOD LUCK in Money, Love, Games, etc. The other is to drive away the things that keep you from getting what you desire. No supernatural claims made. Sold only as curios. Our genuine Loadstones are Highly Magnetic. You will like them. Guaranteed or your money back.
SPECIAL 2 Genuine Live Highly Magnetic Loadstones, the ancient legend of Loadstones and a special carrying bag. All for $1.98 postpaid. (C.O.D. $2.22). Order yours today on a Money-back Guarantee.
OLIVER COMPANY, 3119-F Troost, Kansas City 3, Mo.

his gang; they'd hunt both cowboys in a pack. It must be Mark! He was now but thirty yards or so from the rim. The other gun winked as he stuck his head around a boulder.

Rage gripped Clell. "All right, Mark, I'm comin' for you!" He leaped from cover, firing as he charged. A bullet swiped him on the head, staggering him. But, half dazed, he kept on his feet and moving in on the shadowy figure. He didn't remember dropping his gun, but his hands were empty as he saw his enemy in front of him. The latter had fired his last shot, failing to stop Clell. They crashed together, a Colt barrel slashing down on Clell's head, but he clung to the arm his groping fingers had found.

As they swayed to and fro, Clell's senses slipping, his antagonist gave a sudden violent twist to free himself. He fell away from Clell with a horrible cry. Yates pitched after him. They had plunged over the brink of the gorge. Clell knew when he struck the rushing river, going down in inky depths. He was past knowing anything when his body shot upward again.

Sunlight stabbed at Yates's eyelids. It was only for a short time, in the middle of the day, that the powerful rays penetrated to the bottom of the deep gorge. He was lying with face upturned to the sky, his body wedged in a tangle of driftwood close to the narrow strand. The roar of the Milltail filled his ears as he struggled ashore. That he had escaped the river was miraculous, but apparently Mark Taggart hadn't been as lucky. There was no sign of him anywhere. Mark deserved death for his treachery.

Studying his surroundings, Clell realized the river had carried him some distance before he lodged in the driftwood. Here the walls of the gorge were so steep as to defy ascent, and, after emptying his boots of water, he started along the rocky strand.

SEVERAL hours later, Clell climbed over the gorge rim in the vicinity of their camp. He discovered his six-shooter where it had slipped from his hand the

previous night, stuck it in his wet holster. But he looked in vain for the horses he had staked out. Riding gear, grub sacks and mining tools were missing, too. Evidently someone had visited the camp since he and Mark plunged into the chasm.

Yates sat down to think things over, his clothes drying in the hot sun. He'd lost interest in the quest for gold, didn't believe there was much in the mountains anyway, and now he had no tools. His best move was to return to Lipan, make Raybold disgorge the reward money. What he did afterward would depend on how much trouble he had with the express agent.

It was a long trip back to town on foot, but Clell set forth. By nightfall he was still in the mountains and lay down to sleep, tightening his belt against hunger. He was out of the foothills at noon the next day, plodding across the blazing plain, hoping he'd encounter some rider to give him a lift. But he didn't.

Night had come again when the weary, footsore puncher covered the last hundred yards to Lipan. It was the supper hour and few people were on the street. Making for the express office, Clell saw a buggy coming toward him. It stopped in front of the restaurant and two people got out. Clell halted in the shadows, his eyes bulging in amazement. Mark and Joan! Then Mark had escaped a watery grave. Certain of Clell's death, he had come back to Joan with a lie on his lips, pockets stuffed with stagecoach loot.

Yates's fingers closed on his gun-hilt, he was about to yell to Taggart to turn and shoot it out. Then Joan slipped an arm through Mark's, raised her eyes to his—and Clell's hand slid from his Colt. Hating Mark, he loved Joan too much to kill the man to whom she had evidently been devoted all along. The pair walked into the restaurant and Clell drew a sleeve across his sweating face. There was nothing left for him but to get that money and leave town. Joan would never know the truth about Mark from Clell.

The window of the express office was lighted as Yates sidled up to it. He could see Raybold putting on his coat to go to

CUT OUT THIS BAND TO FIND RING SIZE
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14

AUTHENTIC WESTERN
SADDLE RING
FOR MEN! & WOMEN!
PURE STERLING SILVER
Only $4.95
Postpaid We Pay Tax
STERLING

First time at anywhere near this low price! Authentic replica of romantic western saddle. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver by Navajo Indian craftsmen. Massive style for men, dainty style for women. A gift of distinction. A pleasure to wear. Sent on approval.

SEND NO MONEY! Just clip this ad and mail with your name and address. Pay postman only $4.95 plus few cents postage on arrival; or send cash and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 10 days. If not delighted, return for full refund. ORDER NOW! USE COUPON BELOW!

10 DAY TRIAL ORDER COUPON
ARIZONA CRAFTSMEN ROOM 644D
1904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA
SEND Sterling Saddle Ring as I have indicated below.
☐ C.O.D. ☐ Cash Enclosed, Send Postpaid
NAME
ADDRESS
CITY STATE
☐ Men's ☐ Women's Ring Size

BECOME AN EXPERT
ACCOUNTANT
Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $2,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays." G. I. APPROVED.
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 449-H, Chicago 5, Ill.

Game & Club Supplies
Transparent Beveled and Weights; Transparent Flats; Tops and Bottoms; Door Pops; Hit and Miss Combinations; Luminous Glasses and Readers; Shiners; Daub; Bicycle and Bee Readers. Rush FREE Catalog request.
FREE Catalog
"The Old Reliable"
D. SMYTHE CO.
BOX 8 NEWARK, MO.

BUY and KEEP
U. S.
SAVINGS BONDS

Get into Good Paying
AUTO BODY and FENDER WORK

BIG DEMAND in Auto Body and Fender work. Start training now in your spare time at home for good pay work. Practical shop experience included. U.E.I. Training covers metal work, welding, painting, etc. Placement service—or we will show you how to start your own shop. Behind U.E.I. TRAINING is a large national organization founded 1927. Write today for FREE FACTS—No obligation.

Approved for Training under G.I. Bill

AUTO-CRAFTS DIVISION • UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
1314 BELDEN AVENUE, DEPT. X-4V, CHICAGO 14, ILLINOIS

INVENTORS

Patent laws encourage the development of inventions. Our firm is registered to practice before the U. S. Patent Office. Write for further particulars as to patent protection and procedure and "Invention Record" form at once. No obligation.

McMORROW, BERMAN & DAVIDSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
178-L Victor Building Washington 1, D. C.

OLD LEG TROUBLE

Easy to use Viscose Home Method. Heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for trial if it fails to show results in 10 days. Describe your trouble and get a FREE BOOK.
M. P. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 North Dearborn Street Chicago, Illinois

SONGWRITERS

$100 CASH EVERY MONTH for best song placed with us. Hollywood composers write melody WITHOUT CHARGE. Lead sheets and records furnished. Send song material TODAY for FREE EXAMINATION. You may win $100. Write for details.
CINEMA SONG CO. Dpt. R-21 BOX 670 • BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.

win $100

RHEUMATISM

ARTHRITIS-NEURITIS-SCIATICA
If you suffer the agonizing pains of these diseases when the usual remedies have failed, learn about a new trustworthy, modern, non-surgical treatment method. This marvelous treatment is completely explained in the Ball Clinic's FREE Book. Write today. No obligation.
BALL CLINIC Dept. 59, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4½x2¾. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of $2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C.O.D. Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC SALES CO.
1 West 13th St., Dept. 404, New York 11, N. Y.

PILES

Let us tell you of a mild, painless, low cost home treatment perfected by Dr. O. A. Johnson, for 28 years head physician of one of America's Finest Rectal Clinics where thousands of cases have been successfully treated. Write today for *Free Trial Offer*. No obligation. Address JOHNSON RECTAL CLINIC, Desk 982, Kansas City, Mo.

supper. Clell fisted steel, palmed the doorknob. He was inside when Raybold turned with a sharp exclamation.

"Before you eat, Bret," grated Yates, "I want the twelve hundred dollars due me and Taggart!" He leaned on the counter, covering the man behind it. "I know you're a crook, workin' with them bandits, and you probably got that reward money long ago."

Raybold cleared his throat. "You're a little late to collect. I gave it to Taggart yesterday. If you don't believe me, ask him. He came in with a gun, just like you, demandin' payment. I could've made him trouble, actin' that way, but I didn't. The fact is I received the money from headquarters while you fellows were away in the mountains."

Clell's jaw dropped. He spoke before he thought. "Then it ain't likely Mark held up—" He shut his lips tightly and turned to leave, off guard for a moment.

Raybold, with eyes agleam, breasted the counter, gun-laden hand sweeping out toward the man whose back was turned. Steel cracked on Yates's head with stunning force and he slid limply to the floor. The express agent dragged him the length of the room to his living quarters behind the office. There was a coil of rope in the rear room and he tied the unconscious puncher securely, then hurried from the building.

Yates roused up as three men entered the back room: Raybold, wearing an evil grin, Taggart, disarmed, with Sheriff Leeds gripping his arm. The stinging words that rose to Clell's lips were never uttered when he saw Mark's face light up.

"Clell! I couldn't believe it when Raybold said you were alive! Neither could Joan!"

Sheriff Leeds growled, "This happy reunion will turn sour when you're locked up! Clell, I understand you let slip about a holdup Mark was in—"

"Both of 'em, Leeds!" clamored Raybold. "You thought Corley's gang cleaned the stage last night. Make these cowpokes confess."

Mark said to Clell, "What's he talkin' about?"

BEFORE Yates could explain, the sound of the street door opening and closing, the jingle of spurred boots, was heard in the back room. Raybold, looking through the crack of the door, said, "Customers, sheriff. I'll be back in a minute."

He shut the door as he went out, but the curious Leeds opened it again, softly. Raybold was saying in a low-pitched voice:

"You're crazy to come here! What do you want?"

Griff Corley's harsh voice answered, "Want you to stop trickin' us, Bret! That express box we got last night was short again. You kept half the loot instead of the share we agreed on when you started tippin' us off to shipments. We had to make you pony up at gun's point once before, and if you can't play fair, we'll salivate you and take all."

In the back room, Sheriff Leeds faced Mark and Clell to whisper excitedly, "Did you hear? Raybold's hand in glove with the road agents! They're all out there."

"And you need our help," rapped Yates. "Untie me, quick!"

The moment he was free, he reached for the gun Raybold had taken from him and left on the bureau. Leeds had shoved Mark's Colt into his hand.

"Ready?" asked the sheriff, and he kicked the door open.

Corley, tallest of the outlaws standing at the counter, shot a look past the express agent and conjured a six-shooter into his hand. "Leeds!" he bawled. "Why didn't you say he was here?"

The question, directed at Raybold, was followed by a bullet that sent the agent reeling backward, reaching for his gun. But Bret, who had got his ticket, crumpled floorward while fumbling at his holster. Corley's smoking gun swung on the trio advancing from the rear of the office. He ducked as he fired, but Clell Yates had caught the big owlhooter in his sights. The bullet hit Corley above the left eyebrow before his head was below the counter. He sagged against a smoke-churning mate, who tried to pull Griff up as a shield. Two drumming guns centered lead on the smaller bandit. He

New...Different

It's A Novel Cigarette Dispenser and Ash Tray

Pull the Chain-Out Pops a cigarette

Friends will howl when you pull the chain and ... out pops a cigarette! Holds loads of cigarettes. Bowl on bottom is a deep ash tray, removable for emptying and cleaning. Makes a dandy gift, useful office, or living room rib-tickler.

CIGARETTE "POPS" OUT

This Built for Service "privy" cigarette dispenser and ash tray is beautifully made of wood, stained in an attractive color, with a solid black wooden base. Substantially constructed throughout. $2.98

10 in. HIGH

Pat. Pend.

SEND NO MONEY

Rush coupon below. If this novelty doesn't create a sensation in your home or office, return within 10 days for full refund.

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY.

5th AVE. MDSE. MART, Dept. 5504
150 Nassau St., New York 7, N. Y.

Send.....Cigarette Dispensers and Ash Trays. I will pay postman $2.98 each plus postage. I may return within 10 days for refund.

☐ I enclose $..... for ..... Dispensers at $2.98 postpaid.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone...State....

BEAT ANY DICE GAME

Have Gold in Your Pocket When There's Silver in Your Hair

Send me a Stamped Self-Addressed Envelope and I will tell you things about DICE you never knew. Print Name and Address Plainly.

J. F. STEWART

Box 526 Houston, Texas

DETECTIVES

TRAINING—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—FINGERPRINTS
Easy Method—Short Time.
Home—Travel—Secret Code-Booklet FREE—WRITE.
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM
1701-Z MONROE ST., N.E., WASHINGTON, D. C. 18

FUN WITH AMAZING NEW MAGIC DICE

Here's a special pair of fun dice that can do anything you want them to. It's amazingly easy to predict numbers, perform amusing tricks. No one can guess the hidden "secret" unless you tell them! Display amazing "control" yet the real reason is cleverly concealed from everyone. Fun and fascination! Easy directions explain details. Perform many "magic" tricks! Price only $2.98. Get a pair today. Send no money. Just name and address. On arrival, pay postman only $2.98 plus postage. Money back if not delighted. Address Hollister-White Co., Dept 481-D, 215 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, 1, Ill.

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before. We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW. G. I. APPROVED.
More Ability: More Prestige: More Money
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 449-L, Chicago 5, Ill.

STRAIGHT LEGS

Let Phillips of Hollywood Help You!
Bowlegs and knock-knees helped! Large hips, heavy thighs, thick calves and ankles—streamlined! Fat knees improved! Thin legs developed! Contours made sleek and lovely! Feet and arches strengthened! A most remarkable course! Send $1.00 TODAY for "Straight Legs and Beautifying the Legs"—or order c.o.d.! Satisfaction Guaranteed.
PHILLIPS OF HOLLYWOOD, Dept. A-40
418 W. 64th Street, Los Angeles 3, Calif.

PILES

Successfully corrected or no cost! New painless, low cost home treatment perfected by RECTAL SPECIALISTS helps many. Send for FREE trial offer. No obligation.
DR. MOLZAHN'S CLINIC, Dept. A-13, Box 135, McCook, Neb.

SONG POEMS WANTED

TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Free Examination. Send Your Poems To
J. CHAS. McNEIL
A. B. MASTER OF MUSIC
510-B So. Alexandria Los Angeles 5, Calif.

LINCOLN AND INDIAN HEAD
PENNIES WANTED

WILL PAY **$10.00 EACH** FOR CERTAIN Lincoln Pennies!
Indian Head Cents $50.00; Nickels $500.00; Dimes $1,000.00 All rare coins, bills, stamps wanted! Send 10c for Illustrated Catalogue and other information.
FEDERAL COIN EXCHANGE, 2-AFM, Columbus 5, Ohio

WIN *with* MAGIC CARDS

This special deck of playing cards with secret code on back of each card tells YOU what each card is when lying face down. Easy directions explain code and how to do many kinds of "Magic" tricks. Use same deck for usual card games, such as poker, bridge, etc. Only $1.49. Get a deck today. SEND NO MONEY. Send Name and Address. Pay postman on arrival only $1.49 plus postage. Money back if not delighted. Address Hollister-White Co., Dept. 480-M, 215 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Illinois.

SONG POEMS WANTED TO BE SET TO MUSIC

Publishers need new songs. Submit one or more of your best poems for immediate consideration. Any subject. Send poem.
PHONOGRAPH RECORDS MADE
FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS, 650 Beacon Bldg., Boston 8, Mass.

6 Selected DRESSES $3.99

A dress for every day within your means. Assorted Styles, Colors and Prints. USED but CLEANED. Some may need repairs. Sizes 12 to 18 only.
Send $1.00 deposit, balance C.O.D. plus postage. SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or purchase price refunded promptly. FREE CATALOG.
OUR BETTER DRESSES (used) Sizes 12 to 20 and 38 to 44 — 4 FOR $3.90
COTTON DRESSES (used)....5 for $2.95 — Sizes 12 to 20
OUR BETTER GRADE.....3 for $2.55
COLUMBIA MAIL ORDER CO.
145 GRAND ST. 120A NEW YORK 2, N. Y.

and the leader spilled down together.

The other owlhooters, stooping behind the counter, blazed away across the top. For a moment, the advance of Leeds and the cowboys was checked. Sunk on their heels, they drove lead at the wooden barrier. It went through, tagging the men crouched on the far side, and a wild scramble for the door ensued. Instantly Leeds, Yates, and Taggert leaped forward, slashing fire at the men desperately bent on breaking out of the express office. The door glass was shot to flinders as the bandits dropped under the withering fire, one man dragging himself to the edge of the sidewalk, where he collapsed.

"Mark," said Clell, "I've been thinkin' you double-crossed me, too."

Mark stared. "I don't get that talk. When you fell into the gorge with Cy Juggins . . . sure, it was Juggins! I found his burro that night, started back to camp on the run when I heard the shots. But you both had dropped into the Milltail before I could take a hand. I got a torch and climbed down to look for you. Searched again the next mornin', goin' a mile or more downriver. I was sure the Milltail had finished the pair of you."

"Didn't look far enough, Mark. I was caught in some driftwood. Cy must've drowned and his body drifted on down." Clell's brow contracted. "I never guessed it was Juggins, thinkin' you had lied about hearin' his burro. But it ain't so hard to figure why he attacked me. He didn't like us huntin' his gold."

"That's the way I figured it," nodded Mark. "Feelin' certain you were dead, I was through with prospectin', rode back to collect from Raybold. He gave up the money and I turned all of it over to Alf Carew, knowin' you'd want me to do that with your share. But what gave you the idea I'd toss iron on a sidekick?"

Clell, shame-faced, started to explain. Suddenly his name was spoken joyfully from the doorway, and Joan entered the express office, walking gingerly past the slack forms of the bandits. As Clell and Mark stepped out from behind the counter, the girl flung her arms about Clell's neck. She kissed him.

She pressed his hand tenderly and whispered:

"Come back in an hour... I shall wait for you!"

For many months Baron von Leisenberg had wanted to hear those words! His handsome frame quivered as they were spoken . . . was the exotic Clare, beloved of all men, ready to marry him at last? Or had she discovered some new trick to test his devotion? What happened when the Baron returned? What strange twist of fate was to make this rendezvous exciting beyond measure? Every word in Arthur Schnitzler's story "The Fate of the Baron" leaps alive with revealing human emotions. Every episode unveils new facets of excitement in the search for love.

"The Fate of the Baron" is only one of 83 amazing stories. Here is a collection of amatory fiction unsurpassed in all literature! Scores of tempestuous characters play turbulent roles in these pages. Selected from the world's best stories by a modern sophisticate . . . for the enduring pleasure of those who appreciate the bold, the venturesome, the exciting.

BACHELOR'S QUARTERS

Unlike ordinary fiction the stories in Bachelor's Quarters can be read with mounting pleasure time and again—just as you continue to enjoy looking at intriguing pictures. The passions of the ages are dynamically embodied in these pages. Nowhere else will you find such an incredible variety of saints and sinners . . . demimondes . . . paramours . . . Casanovas . . . Don Juans—those restless humans who are forever seeking new thrills in loving and living!

A TREASURE-HOUSE OF *Exciting* READING!

Like the experiences of life itself, some of these tales are very short, some longer, some gentle and wistful, and some intense and arousing. All tear away the veil of hypocrisy and prudishness—and reveal life and love with stark realism. Tales by some of the world's greatest masters of amorous fiction are included in this volume:

"Jimmy and the Desperate Woman" by D. H. Lawrence . . . "The Honeymoon" by Clement Wood . . . "Entrance Fee" by Alexander Woolcott . . . "After the Transgression" by Marcel Proust . . . "Finding Your Woman in Paris" by Paul Morand . . . "Olivier's Brag" by Anatole France . . . "The Lady Who Couldn't Blush" by Catulle Mendes—and dozens of others. 83 of the most unusual amorous episodes in all fiction. 764 teeming enraptured pages!

FREE • *for your added enjoyment...*

"ONE OF CLEOPATRA'S NIGHTS"

The most seductive female in all history—Cleopatra! What strange influence did this curvaceous queen have over men—*all* men? Why did kings and commoners alike melt before her charms? "One of Cleopatra's Nights" takes you behind the scenes—into the most intimate quarters of Cleopatra's palace—and reveals the voluptuous nocturnal pastimes of the queen. In these burning pages is the secret of Cleopatra's power over men. Don't miss this amazing revelation! It's yours FREE with a copy of "Bachelor's Quarters."

SEND NO MONEY

You get "Cleopatra" FREE . . . "Bachelor's Quarter's" for FREE EXAMINATION! All you have to do is mail the coupon with your name and address. Do it now—for endless hours of the most unusual reading pleasure you've ever had!

Herald Publishing Co. N-4902, 45 E. 17 St. New York 3, N.Y.

FREE EXAMINATION COUPON

HERALD PUBLISHING CO., Dept. N-4902
45 East 17th Street, New York 3, N. Y.

Please send me for FREE EXAMINATION a copy of "Bachelor's Quarters." Include my FREE copy of "One of Cleopatra's Nights". I will deposit $2.98 (plus postage) with postman when the package arrives. If I am not completely satisfied, I may return "Bachelor's Quarters" in ten days and you will return my money. In any case, I may keep "One of Cleopatra's Nights" as my FREE gift.

Name.....

Address.....

City & Zone.....State.....

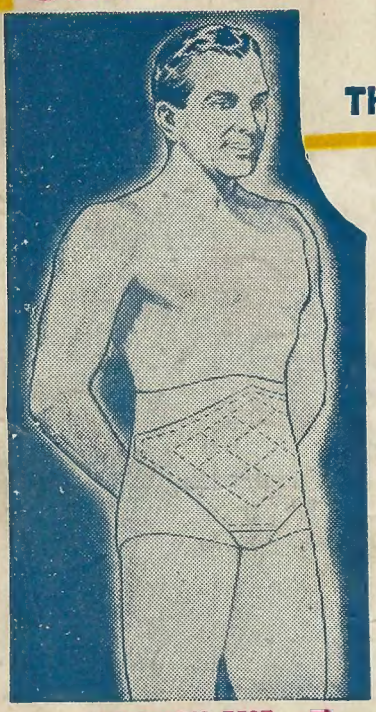
☐ *Save Postage!* Enclose $2.98 with coupon and we will pay postage. Same FREE Gift, FREE EXAMINATION.

THOUSANDS of MEN NOW

Appear SLIMMER *Feel* BETTER *Look* YOUNGER

with Commander

The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter



MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

Yes, Instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD b joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with th COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANC! The COMMANDER presents the exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra double support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensom sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling tha comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Order this new belt today and begi enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" at once.

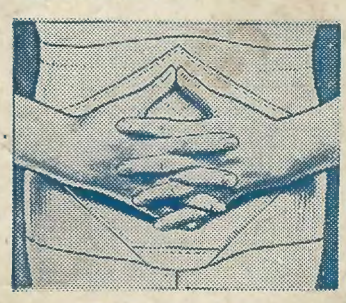
BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET

The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly sup ports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . you wind is longer . . . you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLE The COMMANDER braces your figure . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothe fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

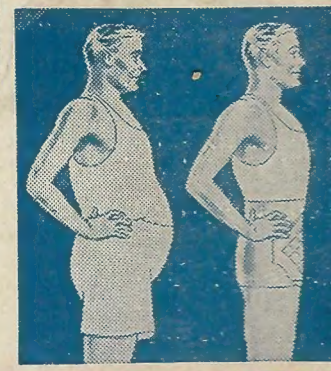
COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!

The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prov a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch. IT GIVES GENUINE MAL PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk SEND FOR IT NOW!



***THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"**

Only COMMANDER contains this NEV principle. A porous non-stretch material i built into the Special stretch body of th COMMANDER . . . in the outline of tw interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBL SUPPORT where you need it most. N BUCKLES, LACES OR STRAPS.



Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."
Dr. A. M. S.
Standish, Mich.

"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."
Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."
J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."
P. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

SEND FOR IT TODAY—USE THIS COUPON

10 DAY FREE TRIAL
SEND NO MONEY

Wear COMMANDER ten days FREE. If it fails to do all we say, send it back and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

ONLY $2.98

SIZES 28 to 47
SPECIAL LARGE SIZES 48 to 60, $3.98

INTRODUCTORY TEN DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

WARD GREEN CO., DEPT. T3A4
113 W. 57TH ST., NEW YORK, 19, N. Y.
Send me the "COMMANDER" for ten days Free Trial. I will pay postman the special price of $2.98 plus postage. If not satisfied after wearing it ten days, I may return it and the purchase price will be promptly refunded.

My waist measure..... My height is.....
(Send string the size of waist if measuring tape is not available.)

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY..... STATE.....

☐ Check here if you enclose $2.98 with this order and we will pay postage charges. The same refund offer holds.

© 1941 W. G. Co.